

3

PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE: MAIN FINDINGS

Previous opinion surveys

- 3.1** There was no shortage of public opinion surveys about the RUC in the run-up to the establishment of our Commission. At the outset of our work we reviewed these earlier surveys, which provided a useful background for our own researches.
- 3.2** At one level, the poll findings reveal a comparatively high level of satisfaction with policing in Northern Ireland. The International Crime Victimization Survey, a poll spanning eleven Western countries, organized in 1996 by the Dutch Ministry of Justice, ranked the police in Northern Ireland higher, in terms of public satisfaction with police performance against crime, than all the continental European countries polled; and, at 63%, lower only than Canada (80%), the United States (77%), Scotland (69%) and England and Wales (68%)¹. It is no accident, incidentally, that most of the overseas police services that we consulted in the course of our work were from these countries.
- 3.3** Similar findings emerge from the Omnibus Surveys carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency on behalf of the Police Authority. Four such surveys over the last three years have produced high (around 70%) approval ratings of police performance in Northern Ireland as a whole.
- 3.4** There is, however, a significant difference between the approval rating among Protestant respondents to the Omnibus surveys (over 80%) and that among Catholics (less than 50%). This brings us to the nub of the problem of policing in the divided society of Northern Ireland. Perceptions and experiences of policing can differ greatly between the two communities.
- 3.5** Interestingly, when asked about the performance of their local police, as opposed to police performance in Northern Ireland as a whole, the satisfaction rate among Catholics has tended to be higher, while the Protestant rate has consistently been lower than their respective approval ratings of police performance in Northern Ireland as a whole. This may reflect, at least in part, a phenomenon we observed in our own consultations of public opinion, namely a distinction between the way in which people think about their local policing experiences and concerns, and the way they think about the RUC as an institution or its role in high profile public order events away from their local area. For a significant number of Protestants, support for the RUC as an institution may be expressed more strongly than satisfaction with the delivery of the local police service; while for some Catholics the local police service may be satisfactory even if they have misgivings about the wider role of the police or about the RUC as an institution.
- 3.6** This brings us to another key point about perceptions of policing in Northern Ireland: the views people express about the police are often essentially political views about the RUC as an institution rather than views about the policing service which they themselves receive. We return to this later, because it is critical to the future policing arrangements that we propose.

¹ Mayhew, P. and Van Dijk, J. "Criminal Victimization in 11 Industrialized Countries: Key Findings from the 1996 ICVS", The Hague, WODC 1997

- 3.7** The Omnibus Surveys have also found a large difference between Protestant and Catholic views of whether the police treat their two communities equally. Consistently around 70% of Protestant respondents thought they did, against only around one quarter to one third of Catholics. Both communities gave a higher satisfaction rating to their local area police on this point, but there was still a large difference between them – Protestants around 80% and Catholics around 50%.
- 3.8** The Northern Ireland Communities Crime Survey, conducted by Queen’s University, Belfast², in 1996, looked at attitudes in different types of community – Protestant and Catholic small towns, Protestant and Catholic lower working class areas, and mixed middle class areas. It found that Catholic lower working class communities had by far the most negative view of whether the police treated people fairly in their local area – only 36% approval, as opposed to around 70% in Catholic small towns and other areas. Moreover, only 19% in Catholic lower working class areas thought the police treated people equally in Northern Ireland as a whole, compared with 73% in Protestant lower working class areas. Interestingly, only half the respondents in Catholic small towns gave a positive response on this point, much less than the 70% approval rating they gave to their local police, which appears to be another reflection of the phenomenon identified in paragraph 3.5.
- 3.9** Respondents to the Omnibus Surveys were asked if they thought the RUC had treated both communities equally in policing public disorder. Positive responses from Protestants have ranged between 64% and 73%, while the corresponding Catholic response has ranged between 19% and 40%, well short of the Protestant figures.
- 3.10** Generally people seem to find the police polite and helpful. The annual Community Attitudes Survey by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency has found that around 80% of both Protestants and Catholics find the police polite, while around 80% of Protestants and 74% of Catholics find them helpful.
- 3.11** The most recent Community Attitudes Survey showed that over three quarters of all Catholics thought there were too few Catholics in the police, and over 60% of all Protestants agreed. Interestingly, however, a quarter of those interviewed in the Omnibus Surveys of 1997 and 1998 claimed they did not know the community composition of the police. In the Community Attitudes Survey of 1996/7, 59% of Protestants and 53% of Catholics believed the police tried equally hard to recruit from both communities (down from 70% and 60% respectively four years before). 70% of Catholic respondents to the latest Community Attitudes Survey cited intimidation or fear of attack as the main reason why Catholics were deterred from entering the police; and around 30% said it was because they did not support the system of government.
- 3.12** Around half the Catholic and Protestant respondents to the Omnibus Survey in 1998 thought there should be more women in the police.

Public consultations by the Independent Commission

- 3.13** Our own consultations produced results broadly similar to findings of the earlier polls. A majority (51%)* of those who wrote individual letters to us expressed general satisfaction with the present

² O’Mahony, D., McEvoy, K., Geary, R., Morrison, J. and Brogden, M., “The Northern Ireland Communities Crime Survey”, Queen’s University, Belfast 1997

* NB. Because of the general nature of much of the correspondence, all these figures are approximate.

police, including some 16%* of correspondents who insisted that there should be no change whatsoever to the policing arrangements. At the other end of the spectrum, 12%* were strongly negative about the present policing arrangements, including 8%* who explicitly called for disbandment of the RUC and the creation of an entirely new police service. In between, approximately 37%* of the letters we received were more neutral in terms of overall satisfaction with the police and made specific proposals for reform, the most common suggestion being that there should be a greater police patrol presence in local neighbourhoods. Petitions were characterised by a call either for total disbandment or for no change, and tended to reflect views we had already received from political parties.

- 3.14** In the public attitudes survey undertaken on our behalf by consultants in May/June 1999, using a random sample of over 1,000 adults in Northern Ireland, 75% of those who had had contact with the police in the previous two years (77% of Protestants and 69% of Catholics) expressed overall satisfaction with the way they had been treated, against 16% who were dissatisfied, 7% of them “very dissatisfied”; and 71% of those who had been victims of a crime expressed such satisfaction, against 17% dissatisfied, 10% of them “very dissatisfied”.
- 3.15** Like the earlier public opinion surveys, our consultations showed that beneath the moderately satisfactory overall popular approval of policing in Northern Ireland lay a sharp difference between Protestant/Unionist perceptions of the police and Catholic/Nationalist views. This was evident in the public attitudes survey. 81% of Protestants expressed overall satisfaction with the police in Northern Ireland, compared with only 43% of Catholics. Less than 5% of Catholics said they had a lot of confidence in the police, compared with 34% of Protestants. Some 37% of Catholics said they had no confidence or not a lot of confidence in the police, compared with only 6% of Protestants. Only 23% of Catholics thought the police represented good value for money, compared with 62% of Protestants.
- 3.16** These differences were very marked in our public community meetings, which tended to fall into one of three categories: meetings held in strongly Protestant/Unionist areas where participants expressed strong, often unqualified, support for the RUC; meetings in strongly Catholic/Nationalist areas where participants expressed strong criticism of the RUC and demanded a new police service; and mixed meetings at which a range of views were expressed. Several people who had different views, or comments on specific aspects of policing, spoke or wrote to us privately after meetings, saying they had felt uncomfortable in such gatherings and preferred to put their points to us on a confidential basis.
- 3.17** Many of the 1,000 or so people who took the floor at our public meetings spoke of their concerns about terrorism, security policing, intimidation, racketeering and sectarian assaults. Others set out their specific concerns about policing in their neighbourhoods. As with the written submissions, the most frequently expressed concern of this kind was that there should be a greater police presence in local neighbourhoods – more patrolling and more local community liaison. Many people spoke or wrote to us about drugs, traffic offences, joyriding, vandalism, loutish behaviour and crimes against the elderly.
- 3.18** The deeper we were able to explore these issues – either publicly or, more often, privately in focus

* NB. Because of the general nature of much of the correspondence, all these figures are approximate.

groups, youth groups or with individuals – the more we were able to see a commonality of interest in policing between the Protestant/Unionist and Catholic/Nationalist communities. A solid majority of both traditions want an effective policing service which maintains order and protects their rights. There is a widespread view in both communities that there should be more neighbourhood patrolling, to deter antisocial behaviour as well as to reduce crime. Most people across the communities would like to see a less “military” style of policing, without armoured cars and fortified police stations, and with less weaponry and smaller patrols.

- 3.19** We noted the similarities between the views expressed by people of both traditions in lower income, high unemployment areas. Commissioners found the concerns expressed in, for example, the Shankill Road area of West Belfast very similar to those expressed on the Falls Road; and the same was true in North Belfast and elsewhere around Northern Ireland. People were concerned about youth crime and antisocial behaviour; about the threat to their children from a rapidly growing drug problem, and about paramilitary thuggery. They wanted a police service with a permanent local presence to deal with these threats, and officers they recognized and could identify with. In both communities people who described themselves as working class characterized the police as middle class people who found it hard to relate to them, and especially to youth; we were told several times that it was felt the police looked down on them and did not treat them with respect. Our public attitudes survey found that 45% of those aged under 35 believed that the police discriminated against younger people.
- 3.20** Our focus group study also found that, in the lower income groups, Protestants could be as strongly alienated from the police as were their Catholic counterparts. The study found too that both communities were concerned about rising crime and drug abuse.
- 3.21** We were struck by the extent to which these sentiments were shared across the religious divide, and in this way our findings seemed to differ from the opinion poll findings cited earlier in this chapter, which recorded a much higher approval rating of the RUC in Protestant lower income areas than in similar Catholic areas. We see the explanation of this in the phenomenon we noted earlier, namely that, while many people regardless of their religious background may have similar expectations and experiences of policing, they may take a different view of the RUC as an institution – a view owing more to political considerations than to policing concerns. We had a stark example of this at one of our public meetings in a Unionist/Loyalist area when, after an hour or so of discussing difficulties facing local policing, one speaker made a statement of unqualified support for “our” police force and the mood of the meeting was abruptly transformed as nearly all subsequent speakers rallied behind the same, essentially political, position. (Our focus group study also had examples of Protestants referring to “our” police, but none of Catholics doing so.)
- 3.22** This brings us back to the point made in Chapter 1, that the problems faced by the police in Northern Ireland are in a sense unique to a divided society but that many of them are general policing issues confronting police elsewhere in the world. Ask people in Newcastle upon Tyne or New York what they want from their police service and they will say more action against drugs and antisocial behaviour. We were glad to find, in our focus group exercise, that people did see these policing issues in a global context, and that they were keen that the police in Northern Ireland should benefit from best practice elsewhere. We found an openness to change, if it was in the interests of effective and efficient policing, even among those who were most supportive of the police as they presently are.

3. 23 We also found broad acceptance across the communities, albeit with differences of emphasis, that the composition of the police service should be more representative of the population, in particular that there should be more Catholic and women officers.