

Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland:

# Public awareness of the system for complaints against the police in Northern Ireland, 2007

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# Executive Summary

## Perceptions of police misconduct

Over four-fifths (82%) of survey respondents had never experienced unacceptable behaviour from a police officer; 13 per cent said that they had experienced it once or twice and 4 per cent said that they had experienced it more frequently.

There was little difference in the proportion of Catholics (19%) compared to Protestants (16%) who said that they had experienced unacceptable behaviour. The most frequently reported type of unacceptable behaviour was that a police officer had been disrespectful or impolite.

## Making complaints against the police

Sixteen per cent of those respondents who had experienced unacceptable behaviour said that they had complained about the incident (compared to 22 two per cent last year). The most frequent reasons given by those who had not complained were firstly a belief that nothing would be done about their complaint and secondly a belief that the incident would not be taken seriously.

Four in ten respondents (40%) said that they would go first of all to a police station in order to make a complaint against the police; 18 per cent said that they would go to a solicitor and 13 per cent said that they would go to the Police Ombudsman.

A larger proportion of Protestants than of Catholics said that they would go to a police station, while Catholics were more likely than Protestants were to say that they would go to a solicitor. Similar levels of Protestant respondents (14%) to Catholic respondents (12%) said that they would go to the Police Ombudsman.

## Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

Eight eight per cent of respondents said that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman, the highest level reported to date. Protestants (90%) were slightly more likely than were Catholics (86%) to be aware of the Police Ombudsman, while respondents aged under 25 showed lower levels of awareness of the Police Ombudsman than older age groups. The source of information about the Police Ombudsman most frequently cited by respondents was television (94%).

The majority (86%) of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman thought that she was independent of the police; this figure has varied only slightly since October 2000. Ten per cent of respondents thought that the Police Ombudsman was part of the police. Protestants were more aware of the Police Ombudsman's independence.

## **Impartiality of Investigation**

Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way, up from 61 per cent in 2002; 18 per cent were not confident that investigations were impartial. Eighty four per cent of Catholics and 74 per cent of Protestants were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially; the latter figure has risen from 51 per cent in 2002.

## **Fairness and equality of treatment of complainants and police officers**

Eighty six per cent of respondents thought that they would be fairly treated if they were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman. There was little difference in the proportions of Catholics (84%) and Protestants (88%) who thought that they would be fairly treated.

Approximately nine out of ten respondents (87%) felt that a police officer being complained about would be treated fairly. Catholics responded slightly more positively than Protestants when asked about the treatment of police officers, with 90 per cent of Catholic respondents thinking that police officers would be treated fairly compared to 85 per cent of Protestant respondents.

Those respondents who thought that either the complainant or the police officer would not be treated fairly were then asked who they thought was treated better; the complainant or the police officer. Thirty eight per cent of these thought the complainant was treated better, while almost half (48%) thought the police officer was treated better.

## **Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing**

More than four fifths of respondents (82%) felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job. The proportion of Protestant respondents who believed that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job has steadily increased from February 2002 until January 2006 until almost the same level as the proportion of Catholic respondents. However in the last year the proportion of Protestants who thought the police would do a good job has fallen to 78 per cent.

The main reasons given by respondents were:

- The police would treat the communities in Northern Ireland more impartially;
- The police would give less cause for complaints from the public; and
- The police would investigate crime better.

# 1. Introduction

The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland was established by the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 to provide an independent system for investigating complaints against the police in Northern Ireland.

The Police Ombudsman's Office is committed to carrying out research and consultation in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the police complaints system. It is also committed to both informing the public about the Police Ombudsman's powers of independent investigation and gaining the confidence of both the public and the police in the police complaints system and processes. As part of a programme of research, the Office carried out its first survey of public awareness of the police complaints system in October 2000. This was followed by surveys in March 2001, March 2002, February 2003, January 2004, March 2005 and January 2006.

This report presents the findings from the eighth survey, which was carried out in January 2007. The data were collected through a module in the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency's (NISRA) Omnibus Survey.

The research provides information on:

- experiences of police misconduct;
- awareness and independence of the Police Ombudsman;
- perceptions of the impartiality of investigation of complaints by the Police Ombudsman;
- perceptions of fairness and equality of treatment of the public and police by the Police Ombudsman;
- perceptions of improvements in policing due to the existence of the Police Ombudsman's Office;

## 2. Methodology

Fifteen questions were commissioned by the Police Ombudsman's Office for inclusion in the January 2007 NISRA Omnibus Survey.

The survey sample was drawn from the Valuation and Lands Agency list of addresses. This list was stratified into three regions (Belfast, East Northern Ireland and West Northern Ireland), and a random sample was drawn from each stratum. Interviewers called at each address on the list and randomly selected one person aged 16 or over living at the address for interview.

The total sample size was 2,200 addresses. The fieldwork took place between 15 January and 16 February 2007. Interviews were achieved with 1,211 individuals, representing a response rate of 61 one per cent of the eligible sample.

Weighting factors were applied to the data in relation to household size.

The percentages given in the tables have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The following symbols have been used:

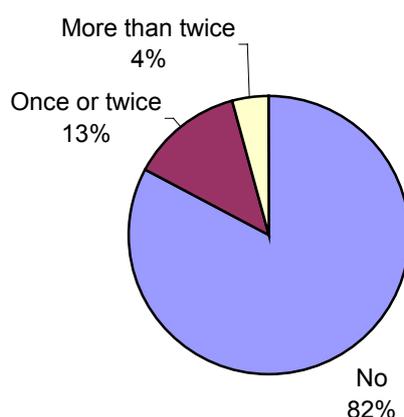
- 0%: figure in cell is less than 0.5%
- - : cell is empty.

### 3. SURVEY FINDINGS

#### Perceptions of police misconduct

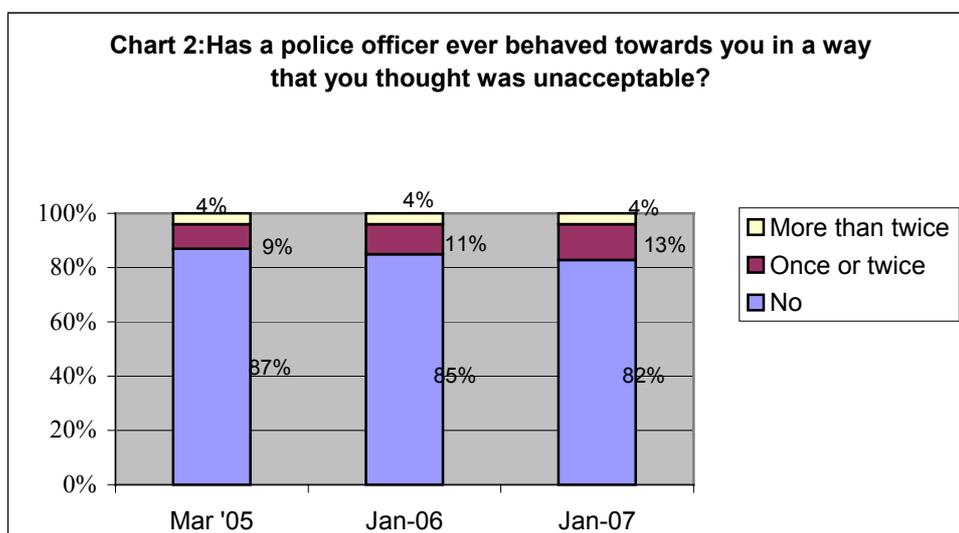
When asked “Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?” the majority of respondents (82%) said no, 13 per cent said they had been treated unacceptably once or twice, and 4 per cent had been treated unacceptably on more than two occasions.

**Chart 1: Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?**



When comparing these findings to previous years there has been a slight increase in the proportion of respondents who said a police officer had behaved toward them in an unacceptable way.

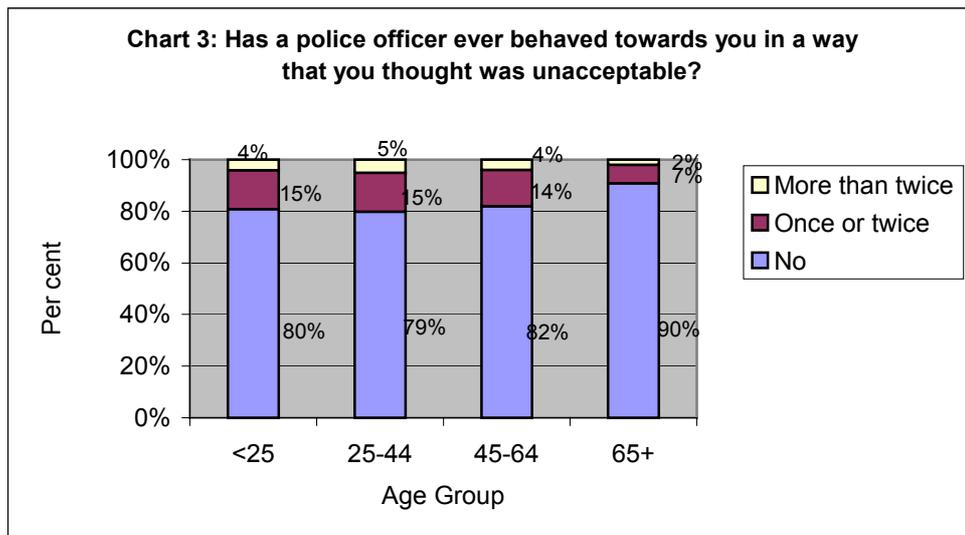
**Chart 2: Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?**



There is little difference in the proportion of Catholics (19%) compared to Protestants (16%) who had experienced unacceptable behaviour.

There was a marked difference in the experiences of males and females, with 24 per cent of males stating that they had been treated unacceptably on at least one occasion, compared to 12 per cent of females.

Respondents aged over 65 were less likely than respondents in other age groups to say that they had experienced unacceptable treatment.



Those respondents who stated that they had been treated unacceptably by a police officer were asked to elaborate further; to describe the way in which the officer had behaved; whether or not they had complained about the incident; and, if they hadn't complained, why they hadn't.

When asked what the officer did that they felt was unacceptable, the most common response was that the officer was disrespectful or impolite to the respondent (66%). The next most common response was that the officer did not do his/her duty properly (22%) or did not follow proper procedures (20%).

Table 1 below shows a full breakdown of the types of unacceptable behaviour reported by respondents.

**Table 1: Types of unacceptable behaviour**

Behaviour	% respondents
Officer was disrespectful or impolite	66
Officer did not carry out their duty properly	22
Officer didn't follow proper procedures	20
Wrongly accused of behaviour	17
Harassment	17
Stopped or searched without reason	15
Officer swore	14
Officer was violent	13
Discrimination by race, gender, age or religion	11
Officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language	8
Other	4
Searched house without reason	3
Officer took an item of respondent's property	2

(Note: Percentages add to more than 100% as respondents could give more than one response)

### **Making complaints against the police**

Of those respondents who had stated that they were treated in an unacceptable manner only 16 per cent said that they had made a complaint about the incident. This proportion has decreased from last year when 22 per cent said they had made a complaint.

Respondents who did not complain about their experience were asked why they didn't make a complaint. The main reason quoted was a belief that nothing would be done about their complaint (30%), followed by a belief that it would not be taken seriously (25%). Only 4 per cent of respondents said that they didn't make a complaint because they didn't know how (Table 2).

**Table 2: Main reason why incident was not complained about**

Reason	% respondents
Felt nothing would be done about the complaint	30
Felt it would not be taken seriously	25
Incident was not serious enough	18
Could not be bothered complaining	8
Scared of police reprisals	7
Didn't want to make trouble for the police	2
Didn't know how to complain	4
Other	7

All respondents were asked where they would go initially to make a complaint against the police. Table 3 shows that respondents were most likely to make their complaint at their local police station (40%). Thirteen per cent of respondents would take their complaint directly to the Police Ombudsman (compared to 9% in 2006).

**Table 3: Where respondents would go to initially to make a complaint**

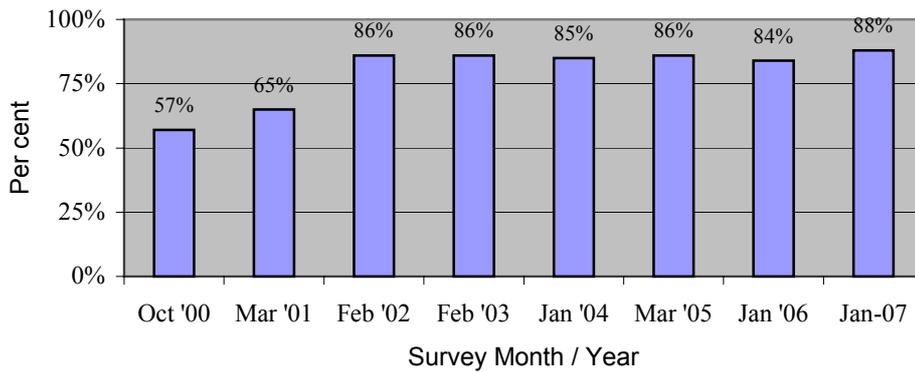
<b>Where respondents would go to complain</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Local police station	40
Solicitor	18
Police Ombudsman	13
The Citizens Advice Bureau	7
Your MP/MLA	5
A local politician, e.g. a councillor	5
Chief Constable of the PSNI	3
The Policing Board	1
Other	1
Don't know	2
Wouldn't make a complaint	4

Protestants were more likely than Catholics to make their complaint at their local police station (48% compared to 31%). Similar proportions of Catholic and Protestant respondents were likely to go to the Police Ombudsman to make their complaint (14% of Protestants compared to 12% of Catholics). Catholic respondents (23%) were more likely than Protestants (14%) to make their complaint to a solicitor. Catholic respondents were also slightly more likely to say that they would go to a local politician (8%, compared to 4% of Protestants).

### **Awareness of the Police Ombudsman**

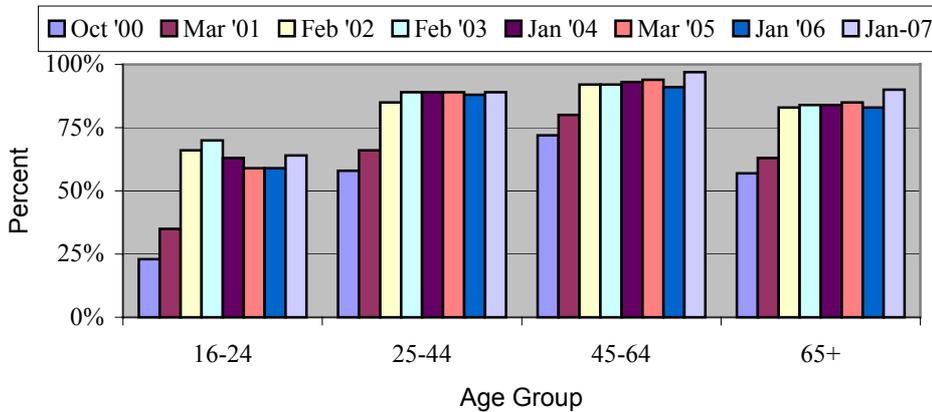
Despite only 13 per cent of respondents saying that they would initially go to the Police Ombudsman to make a complaint against the police, 88 per cent of respondents stated that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Chart 4 shows that awareness levels have been consistently high since February 2002 and the awareness level reported in 2007 is the highest level reported to date.

**Chart 4: Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?**



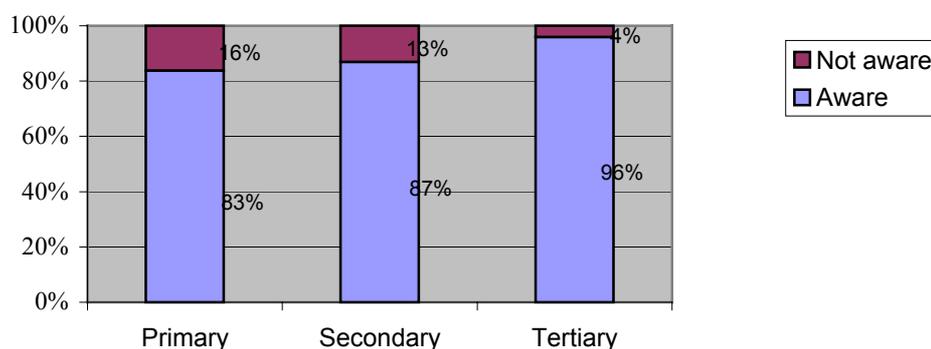
Similar levels of males (89%) and females (86%) had heard of the Police Ombudsman. Protestants were slightly more likely to have heard of the Police Ombudsman than Catholics (90% compared to 86%). Awareness of the Police Ombudsman is greatest amongst the 45 to 64 age range (97%). Those aged under 25 continue to exhibit lower levels of awareness, with only 64 per cent of respondents being aware. (Chart 5).

**Chart 5: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by Age Group**



Awareness of the Police Ombudsman also varied according to the respondents' level of educational attainment, with higher levels of educational attainment being associated with higher levels of awareness (see Chart 6).

**Chart 6: Awareness of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland by highest educational qualification**



When asked how they had heard about the Police Ombudsman, over nine out of ten respondents (94%) cited television. This echoed previous findings on the source of people's awareness, with other media appearing at similar levels to previous surveys.

**Table 4: Source of knowledge of the Police Ombudsman**

Source of information	% respondents						
	Oct '00	Mar '01	Feb '02	Jan '04	Mar '05	Jan '06	Jan '07
Television	74	82	91	93	89	90	94
Newspaper/Magazine	35	49	49	56	43	49	50
Radio	23	31	39	44	31	40	43
Word of mouth	8	8	10	13	9	12	10
Friends/Family	4	6	8	9	4	7	5
Through work	-*	6	6	7	5	7	4
Leaflet	3	1	4	6	4	7	4
Poster	1	1	2	4	2	3	2
Internet	-*	-*	-*	1	1	3	2
Attended presentation	-*	-*	-*	1	1	1	1
Other	3	1	1	1	1	2	1

*(Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)*

All those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were asked for their opinion on whether or not the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police or part of the police. The majority of these respondents (86%) felt

that the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police, with only 10 per cent believing that she was part of the police. The results over time have remained fairly stable, suggesting that the maximum capacity on the awareness of the Police Ombudsman's independence has been achieved (Chart 7).

**Chart 7: Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is part of the police or independent of the police?**

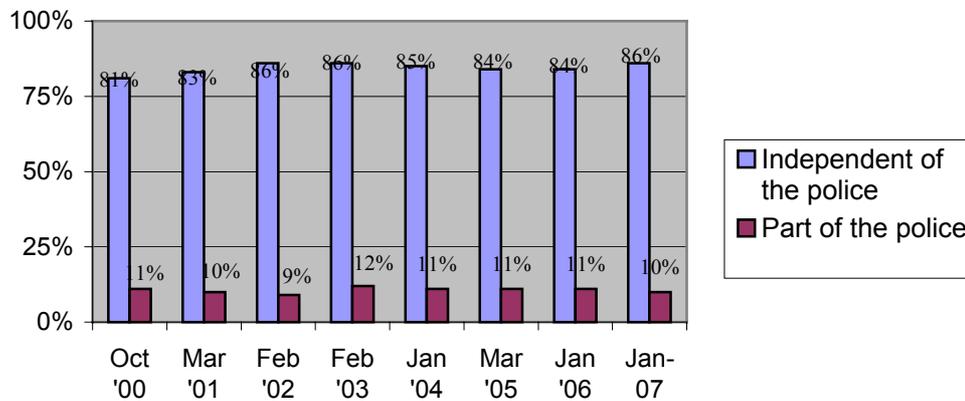
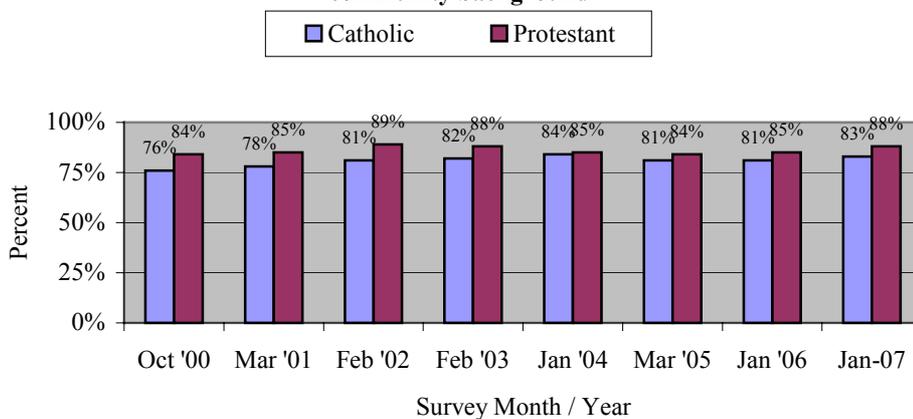


Chart 8 shows the differences in awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman between Catholics and Protestants. The current survey shows that in 2007 Protestants were more likely than Catholics to be aware of the office's independence.

**Chart 8: Awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman by community background**



Respondents aged between 45 and 64 displayed the highest level of awareness of the Police Ombudsman's independence from the police (92%), while the under 25s showed the lowest level of awareness (68%).

**Table 5: Awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman by age group**

<i>Independence of the Police Ombudsman</i>	<i>% respondents in Age Group</i>			
	<i>16 – 24</i>	<i>25 – 44</i>	<i>45 – 64</i>	<i>65+</i>
<i>Part of the police</i>	28	10	7	6
<i>Independent of the police</i>	68	87	92	85
<i>Don't know</i>	2	2	1	8

Respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were asked where they would go to find contact details for the Office in the event of them needing to make contact. Fifty per cent would use the telephone directory. Eighteen per cent would use the Internet and 16 per cent would go to a police station (Table 6).

**Table 6: Source of information for contacting the Police Ombudsman's Office**

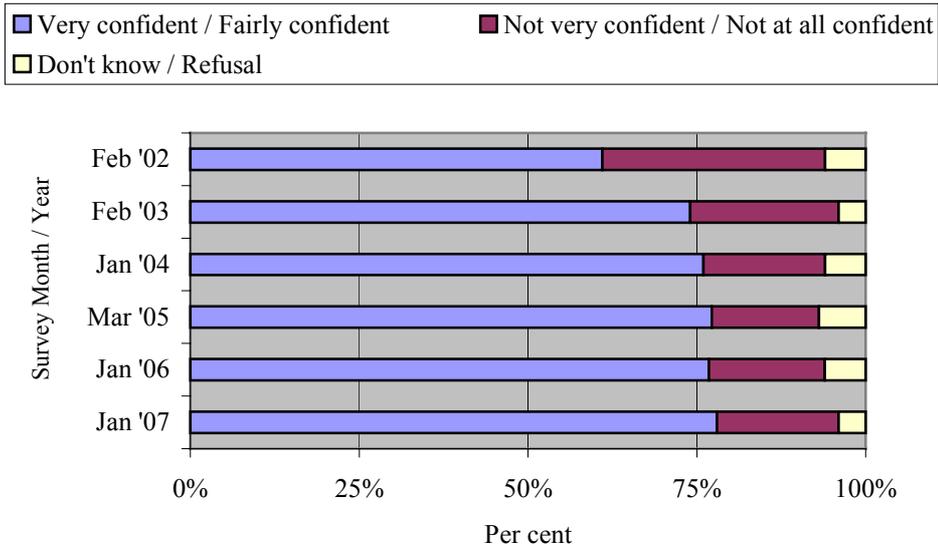
<i>Where one would go to find contact details for the Police Ombudsman</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
<i>Telephone directory</i>	50
<i>Internet</i>	18
<i>Police station</i>	16
<i>Directory enquiries</i>	7
<i>Advice agency</i>	3
<i>Political representative</i>	3
<i>Legal representative</i>	3
<i>Call at office</i>	3
<i>Community association</i>	2
<i>Other</i>	4
<i>Don't know</i>	9

*Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)*

### **Impartiality of Investigation**

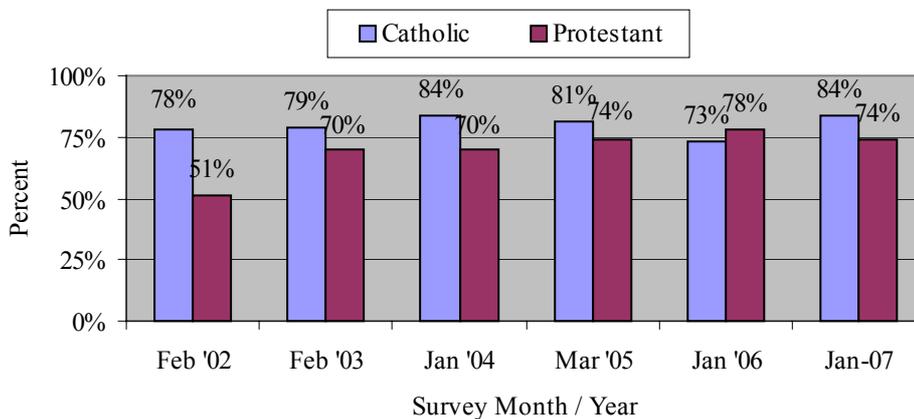
Seventy eight per cent of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were fairly confident or very confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way. Eighteen per cent were not very confident or not at all confident of the Police Ombudsman's impartiality in investigations. Chart 9 below shows that confidence in the impartiality of the Police Ombudsman has increased markedly since February 2002 (61%), but that the trend has also slowed down significantly.

**Chart 9: How confident are you that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints against the police in an impartial way?**



Over the period from February 2002 until January 2007 the level of confidence has risen from 51 to 74 per cent among Protestants and from 78 to 84 per cent among Catholics. In 2007 a higher proportion of Catholic respondents were therefore confident that investigations are dealt with in an impartial manner. This is consistent with previous years except for in 2006 when confidence in impartiality among Catholics fell to 73 per cent compared to 78 per cent among Protestants.

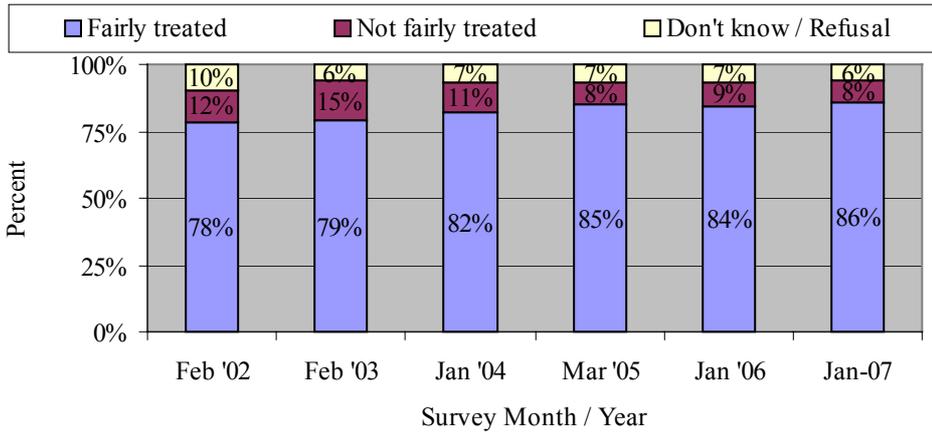
**Chart 10: Confidence in impartiality of police complaints system by community background**



### Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers

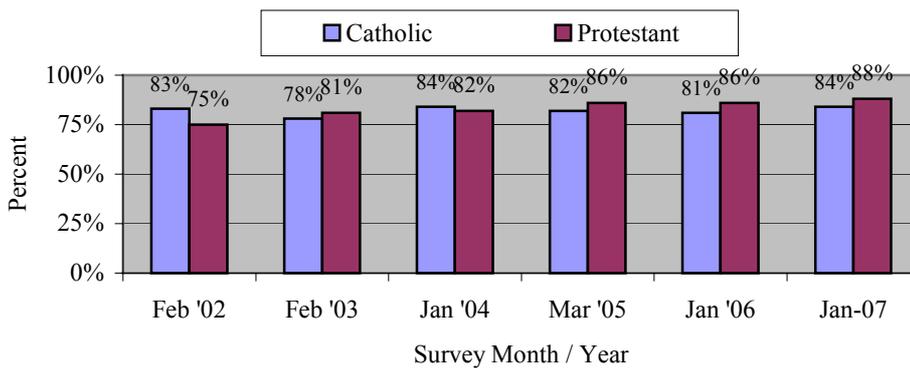
Respondents were asked how they felt complainants and police officers would be treated by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made. Eighty six per cent of respondents stated that they thought that they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint against a police officer. This figure has increased between 2002 and 2007.

**Chart 11: If you were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman, do you think that you would be treated fairly?**



Further analysis of responses to this question shows that there is little difference between Catholics and Protestants in relation to how they thought they would be treated if they made a complaint. (84% of Catholics compared to 88% of Protestants thought they would be treated fairly).

**Chart 12: Confidence in fairness of treatment by Police Ombudsman by community background**

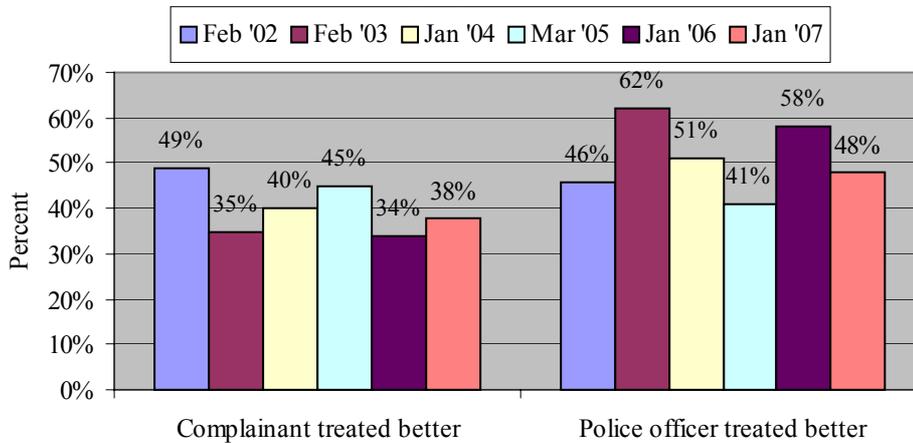


Similar results were found when respondents were asked for their views on whether or not police officers would be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made against them. Eighty seven per cent felt that police officers would be treated fairly. Catholic respondents were slightly more likely to think that the police officer would be treated fairly than Protestant respondents (90% compared to 85%).

Those respondents who felt that either the complainant or the police officer would not be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman, were subsequently asked who they felt would be treated better; the complainant or the police officer.

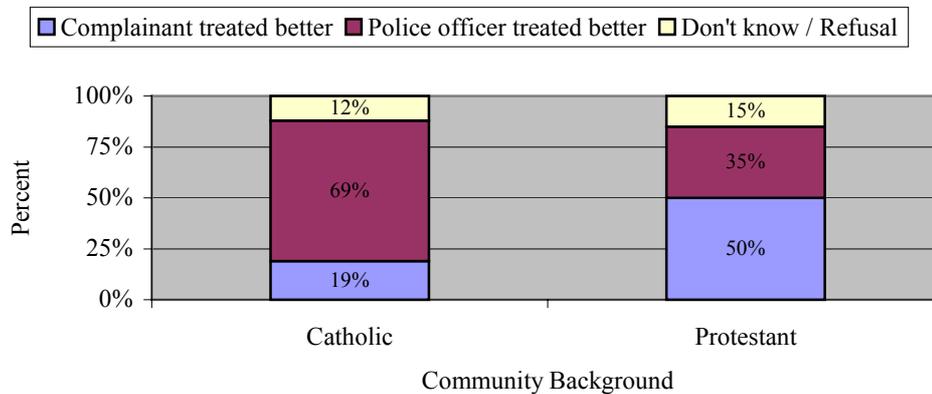
Thirty eight per cent of these respondents believed that the complainant would be treated better, while 48 per cent felt that the police officer would be treated better.

**Chart 13: Do you think the Police Ombudsman treats the person making the complaint better or the police officer being complained about better?**



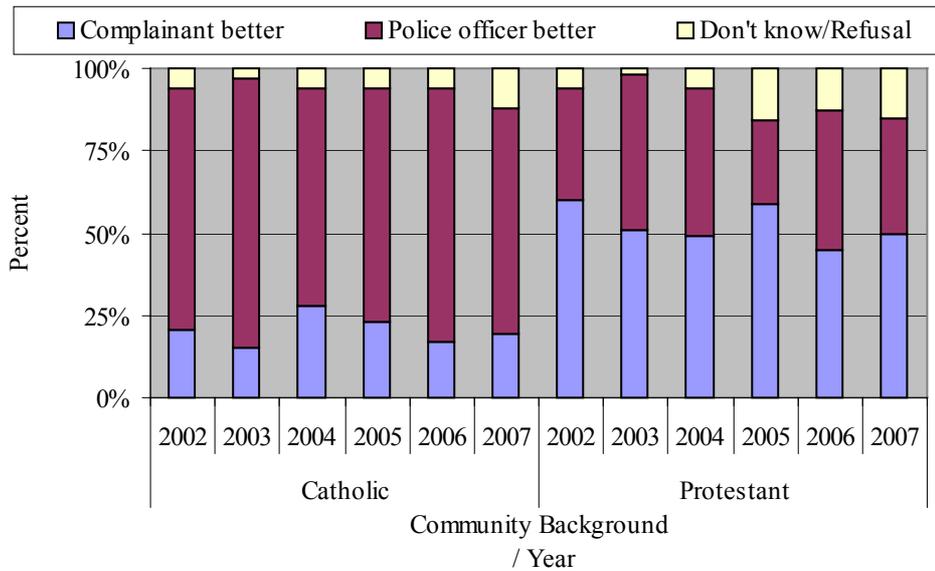
However, a high level of polarisation was found to exist between the two main religious communities in relation to who would be treated better by the Police Ombudsman. Protestant respondents (50%) were more likely than Catholics (19%) to feel that the complainant would be treated better than the police officer in question, while the opposite was true for Catholic respondents, with 69 per cent believing that the police officer would be treated better, compared to 35 per cent of Protestants.

**Chart 14: Fairness of treatment of complainant and police officer by community background**



The trend evidenced by the results is similar in nature to those seen in previous years, although the magnitude of the differential has changed over the years. However, these findings should be treated with some caution, as the respondent base is quite small (Chart 15).

**Chart 15: Fairness of treatment of complainant and police officer by community background**



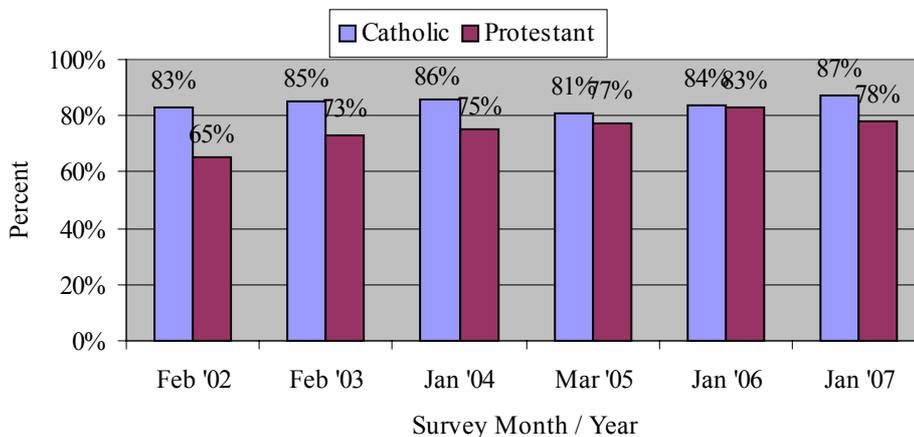
### Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

The final line of questioning undertaken was on whether the Police Ombudsman would contribute to effective policing in Northern Ireland and what aspects of the police would be improved due to the impact of the Police Ombudsman.

Overall, more than four fifths of respondents (82%) felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland will do a good job (83% in 2006), and 12% said that the Police Ombudsman would not help policing in Northern Ireland.

The proportion of Protestant respondents who believed that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job has steadily increased from February 2002 to a similar level for Catholic respondents in January 2006 as illustrated in Chart 16). However, in the last year confidence among Protestants has fallen – 78 per cent thought the Police Ombudsman would help the police do a good job.

**Chart 16: Confidence that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job by community background 2002 - 2007**

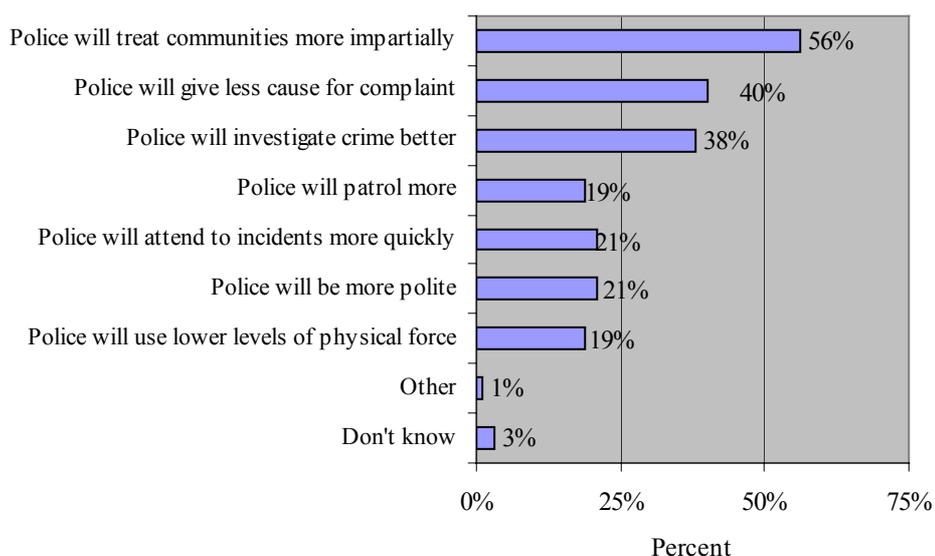


Those respondents who stated that they thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police do a good job, were asked in what way they felt the police would do a better job. The three main reasons quoted were:

- the police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially (56%);
- the police will give less cause for complaints from the public (40%);
- the police will investigate crime better (38%).

A full breakdown of the responses given is illustrated in Chart 17 below.

**Chart 17: In what way do you think the police will do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman?**



The most common way given by both communities was that the police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially because of the Police Ombudsman.

**Table 7: In what way will the police do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman by Community Background**

	<i>Community Background % respondents</i>	
	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Protestant</i>
<i>Police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially</i>	62	51
<i>The police will give less cause for complaints from the public</i>	36	42
<i>The police will investigate crime better</i>	39	38
<i>The police will patrol more</i>	21	17
<i>The police will attend to incidents more quickly</i>	26	18
<i>The police will be more polite</i>	22	19
<i>The police will use less physical force</i>	23	15
<i>Other</i>	2	1
<i>Don't know</i>	2	3

*(Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)*

Appendix:

Survey Questions



1. Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?

Yes – once or twice

Yes – more than once or twice

No

Don't know/refused/no answer

2. (If yes at 1) Thinking about the most recent incident, what did the police officer do that you thought was unacceptable?

The officer was violent towards you (for example, pushed or struck you)

The officer was disrespectful or impolite to you

The officer swore at you

The officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language when dealing with you

The officer didn't do his/her duty properly (for example, by not investigating the crime properly or not responding to a call)

The officer harassed you

The officer didn't follow proper procedures

The officer stopped or searched you without reason

The officer searched your house without reason

The officer said you had done something you hadn't

The officer took an item of your property

The officer discriminated against you (for example, because of your race, gender, age or religion)

Other (please specify)

Don't know/refused/no answer

3. (If yes at 1) Thinking again about the most recent incident, did you make a complaint about this?

Yes

No

Don't know/refused/no answer

4. (If no at 3) What was the main reason you didn't make a complaint about this?

Felt it would not be taken seriously

Felt nothing would be done about it

Incident was not serious enough

Couldn't be bothered

Scared of police reprisals

Didn't want to make trouble for the police

Forgot

Didn't know how to complain about police behaviour

Other (please specify)

Don't know/refused/no answer

5. If you wanted to make a complaint against the police, where would you go first of all? (code one only)

Local police station

Solicitor  
The Police Ombudsman  
The Chief Constable of the PSNI  
Your MP/MLA  
A local politician (for example, councillor)  
The Citizen's Advice Bureau  
The Policing Board  
Wouldn't make a complaint  
Other (please specify)  
Don't know/refused/no answer

6. Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?

Yes  
No  
Don't know/refused/no answer

7. (If yes at 6) How did you hear of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland? (code all that apply)

Television  
Radio  
Newspaper/Magazine  
Through work  
Word of mouth  
Friends/Family  
Internet  
Leaflets  
Posters  
Attended a presentation about the Police Ombudsman  
Other (please specify)  
Don't know/refused/no answer

8. Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is part of the police or independent of the police?

Part of the police  
Independent of the police  
Don't know/refused/no answer

9. How confident are you that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints against the police in an impartial way?

Very confident  
Fairly confident  
Not very confident  
Not at all confident  
Don't know/refused/no answer

10. If you needed to contact the Office of the Police Ombudsman where would you go to find the relevant contact details?

Telephone directory

Internet

Call personally at the Office of the Police Ombudsman

Directory enquiries

Advice agency

Political representative

Legal representative

Police station

Community association

Other

11. If you were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman, do you think that you would be treated fairly?

Yes

No

Don't know/refused/no answer

12. If you made a complaint against a police officer, do you think the police officer would be treated fairly?

Yes

No

Don't know/refused/no answer

13. (If no to 11 or 12) Do you think the Police Ombudsman treats the person making the complaint better or the police officer being complained about better?

Treats the person making the complaint much better

Treats the person making the complaint slightly better

Treats the police officer being complained about slightly better

Treats the police officer being complained about much better

Don't know/refused/no answer

14. Do you think the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland will help ensure that the police do a good job?

Yes

No

Don't know/refused/no answer

15. In what way do you think the police will do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman?

The police will be more polite

The police will attend to incidents more quickly

The police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially

The police will investigate crime better

The police will use less physical force

The police will patrol more

The police will give less cause for complaints from the public

Other (please specify)

Don't know/refused/no answer

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