



Research Report 01/2005

**Public awareness of the system for
complaints against the police in
Northern Ireland, 2005**

Michael Bennett

Policy and Practice Directorate

Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Contents

	Page
Summary	3
1 Introduction	5
2 Methodology	6
3 Survey Results	7
Perceptions of police misconduct	7
Making complaints against the police	10
Awareness of the Police Ombudsman	10
Impartiality of Investigation	14
Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers	15
Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing	18
Appendix 1: Survey Questions	22

Summary

1. Perceptions of police misconduct

Over four-fifths (87%) of respondents said that a police officer had never behaved towards them in a way they thought was unacceptable; 9% said that it had happened once or twice and 4% said that it had happened more frequently. These findings are similar to those from previous surveys.

Fourteen *percent* of Catholics said that they had experienced unacceptable behaviour compared to 11% of Protestants. The most frequently reported type of unacceptable behaviour was that a police officer had been disrespectful or impolite.

2. Making complaints against the police

Some 27% of those respondents who had experienced unacceptable behaviour said that they had complained about the incident. 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 was not serious enough.

Just over half of all respondents (52%) said that they would go first of all to a police station in order to make a complaint against the police; 16% said that they would go to a solicitor and 11% 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 almost three times as likely as were Protestants to say that they would go to a solicitor. Catholics and Protestants were equally likely to say that they would go to the Police Ombudsman.

3. Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

Eighty-six *percent* of respondents said that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman, a similar proportion to those in previous surveys. Protestants (88%) were marginally more likely than were Catholics (83%) 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 (89%).

The majority (84%) 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. Eleven *percent* of respondents thought that the Police Ombudsman was part of the police. Protestants and Catholics had similar levels of awareness of the Police Ombudsman's independence.

4. Impartiality of Investigation

Just over three-quarters (78%) of respondents were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way, up from 61% in 2002; 16% were not confident that investigations were impartial. Eighty-one *percent* of Catholics and 74% of Protestants were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially; the latter figure has risen from 51% in 2002.

5. Fairness and equality of treatment of complainants and police officers

More than four-fifths (85%) of respondents thought that they would be fairly treated if they were to make a complaint against a police officer to the Police Ombudsman, a marginally larger proportion than in previous years (82% in 2004). Similar proportions of Catholics (82%) and Protestants (86%) thought that they would be fairly treated.

A similar number of respondents (84%) felt that a police officer being complained about would be treated fairly. Catholics responded more positively than Protestants when asked about the treatment of police officers, with 89% of Catholic respondents thinking that police officers would be treated fairly compared to 81% of Protestant respondents.

Those respondents who said that they thought that either the complainant or the police officer would not be treated fairly were asked which party they thought the Police Ombudsman treated better. Four out of ten (41%) said that they thought the police officer was treated better, while marginally more (45%) said that they thought the complainant was treated better. There was a significant difference between the two communities in their responses to this question, with Catholics being more likely than Protestants to think that the police officer would receive better treatment and Protestants being more likely than Catholics to think that the complainant would be treated better.

6. Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland do a good job. Catholics (81%) were marginally more likely than Protestants (77%) to hold this view.

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.

Generally, Catholic respondents gave more reasons than Protestant respondents for thinking that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police did a good job.

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; a second survey was carried out in March 2001, a third in March 2002, a fourth in February 2003, and a fifth in January 2004. Subsequently, the Office commissioned a sixth survey of public awareness of the police complaints system in March 2005.

This report presents the findings from the sixth survey. The data were collected through a module in the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency's (NISRA) Omnibus Survey. The fieldwork took place during March and April 2005.

The research provides information on:

- Experiences of police misconduct
- Awareness of the Police Ombudsman and of the 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 public and police by the Police Ombudsman
- Perceptions of improvements in policing due to the existence of the Police Ombudsman's Office.

2. Methodology

Fourteen questions were commissioned by the Police Ombudsman's Office for inclusion in the March 2005 NISRA Omnibus Survey.

The survey sample was drawn as a list of 2,200 addresses 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 fieldwork took place between 7th March and 8th April 2005. Interviews were achieved with 1092 individuals, representing a response rate of 59% 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:

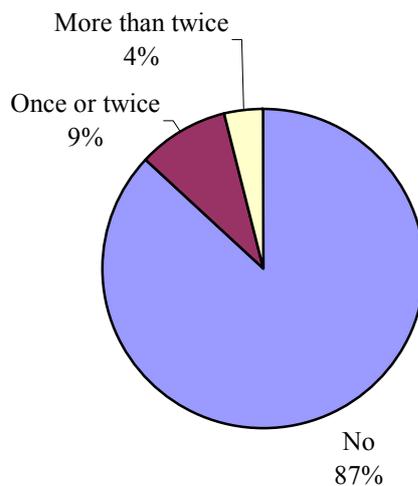
- 0%: figure in cell is less than 0.5%
- - : cell is empty.

3. Survey Results

Perceptions of police misconduct

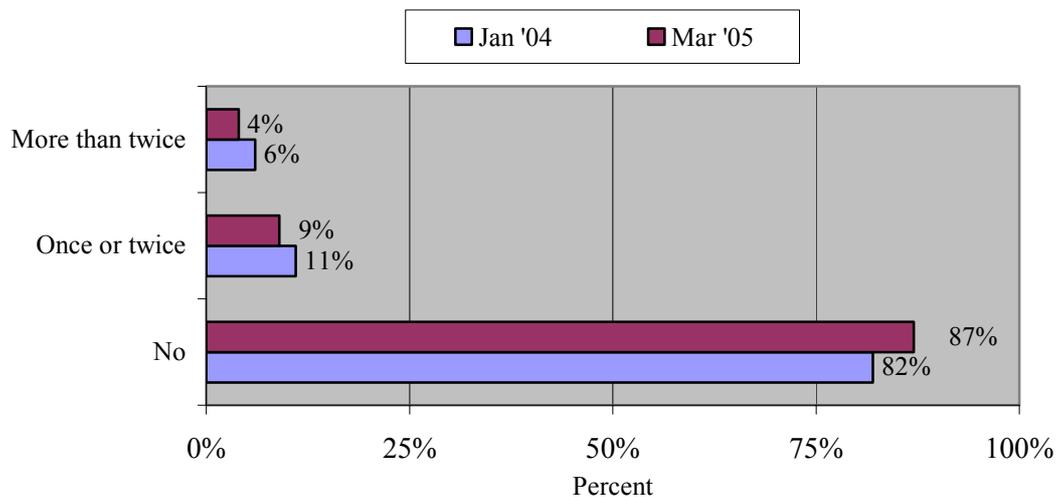
When asked “Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?” the majority of respondents (87%) said no, 9% said they had been treated unacceptably once or twice, and 4% had been treated unacceptably on more than 2 occasions.

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



When comparing these findings to those in the previous year a marginal improvement can be seen, as illustrated in Chart 2 below.

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

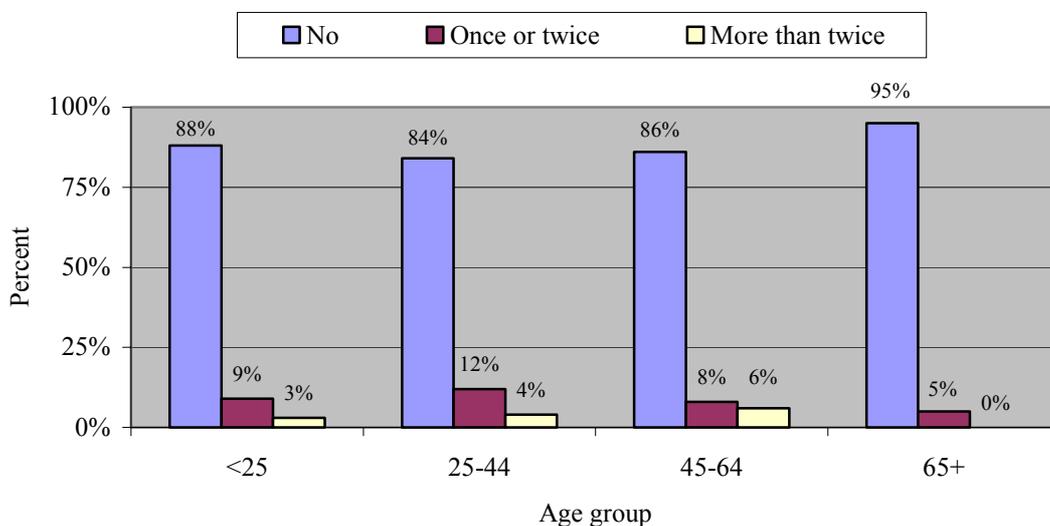


There is little difference between Catholic and Protestant respondents in relation to whether or not they had experienced unacceptable behaviour (14 % of Catholics had experienced unacceptable behaviour compared to 11% of Protestants).

There was a more marked difference in the experiences of males and females, with 17% of males stating that they had been treated unacceptably on at least one occasion, compared to 8% of females.

Respondents in the 25 - 44 and 45 – 64 age groups reported a higher incidence of unacceptable treatment by a police officer than those in the under 25 and over 65 age groups.

Chart 3: Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?



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 (61%). The next most common response was that the officer was violent, i.e. the officer pushed or struck the respondent (24%).

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

Table 1: Types of unacceptable behaviour

Behaviour	Percentage
Officer was disrespectful or impolite	61%
Officer was violent	24%
Harassment	22%
Officer didn't follow proper procedures	18%
Officer did not carry out their duty properly	17%
Wrongly accused of behaviour	15%
Stopped or searched without reason	13%
Officer swore	13%
Officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language	11%
Discrimination by race, gender, age or religion	10%
Searched house without reason	4%
Officer took an item of respondent's property	3%
Other	3%

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

Of those respondents who had stated that they were treated in an unacceptable manner, 27% said that they had made a complaint about the incident. Protestant respondents (34%) who had been treated unacceptably were more likely to make a complaint than Catholic respondents (27%).

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 (33%), followed by a belief that the incident was not serious enough (24%). Only 2% of respondents said that they didn't make a complaint because they didn't know how.

Table 2: Main reason why incident was not complained about

Reason	Percentage
Felt nothing would be done about the complaint	33%
Incident was not serious enough	24%
Felt it would not be taken seriously	20%
Could not be bothered complaining	10%
Scared of police reprisals	2%
Didn't know how to complain	2%
Didn't want to make trouble for the police	1%
Other	8%

Making complaints against the police

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 (52%). Eleven *percent* of respondents would take their complaint directly to the Police Ombudsman.

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

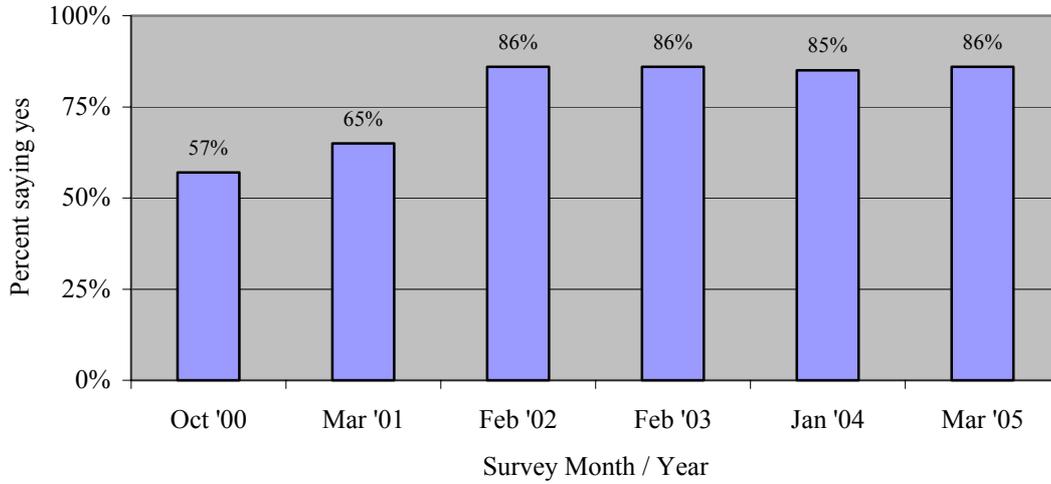
Where respondents would go to complain	Percentage
Local police station	52%
Solicitor	16%
Police Ombudsman	11%
The Citizens Advice Bureau	5%
Your MP/MLA	4%
A local politician, e.g. a councillor	3%
Chief Constable of the PSNI	2%
The Policing Board	1%
Other	1%
Don't know	2%
Wouldn't make a complaint	3%

A much larger percentage of Protestants (61%) than Catholics (36%) said that they would make their complaint at their local police station, while Catholic respondents (27%) were almost three times as likely as Protestants (10%) to make their complaint to a solicitor. Respondents from both of the main community backgrounds were equally likely to go to the Police Ombudsman to make their complaint (11% of both Catholics and Protestants).

Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

Despite only 11% of respondents saying that they would initially go to the Police Ombudsman to make a complaint against the police, in March 2005, some 86% of respondents stated that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. This is similar to the levels reported in the previous three surveys, and would suggest that the maximum level of public awareness has been achieved.

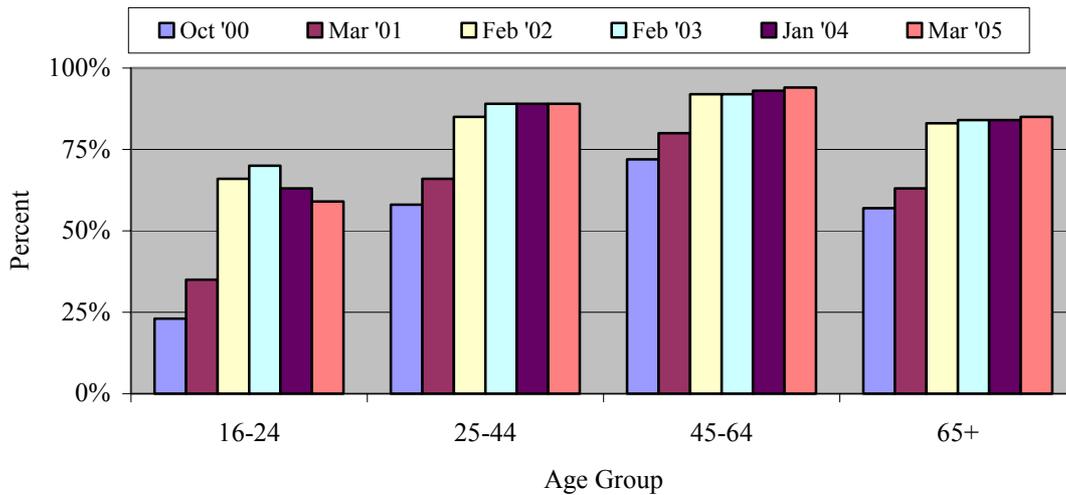
Chart 4: Have you heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland?



Generally speaking males (88%) are slightly more likely to have heard of the Police Ombudsman than females (83%) and Protestants (88%) are more likely to have heard of the Police Ombudsman than Catholics (83%). These results are similar to those evidenced in the last few years.

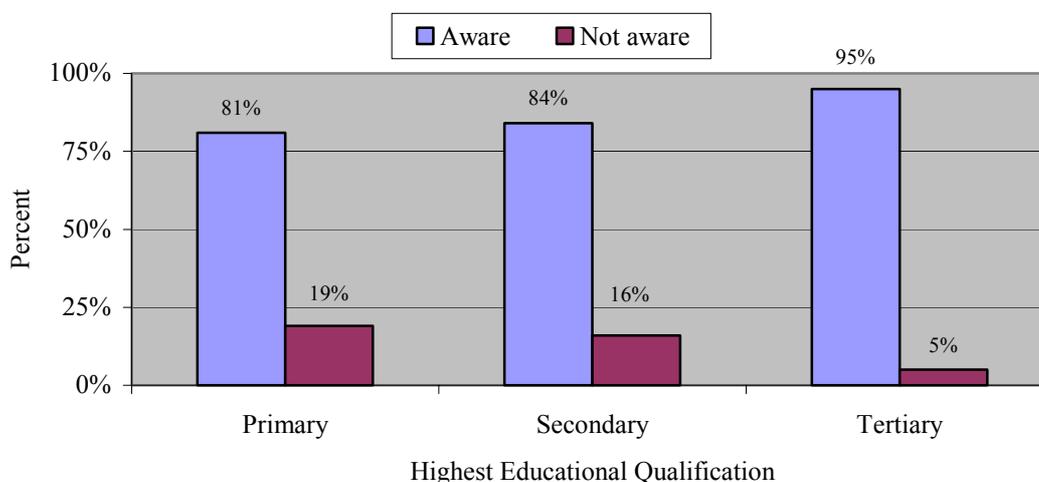
Awareness of the Police Ombudsman is greatest amongst the 45 – 64 age range (94%), while those aged under 25 continue to exhibit lower levels of awareness, with fewer than 3 in 5 respondents being aware. Furthermore, awareness in this age range has declined steadily over the last 2 years, falling from 70% in 2003 to 63% in 2004 and 59% in 2005.

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, almost nine out of ten respondents (89%) cited television as a source of their awareness. This echoed previous findings on the source of people’s awareness, with other mediums performing relatively similar to their occurrence in previous surveys.

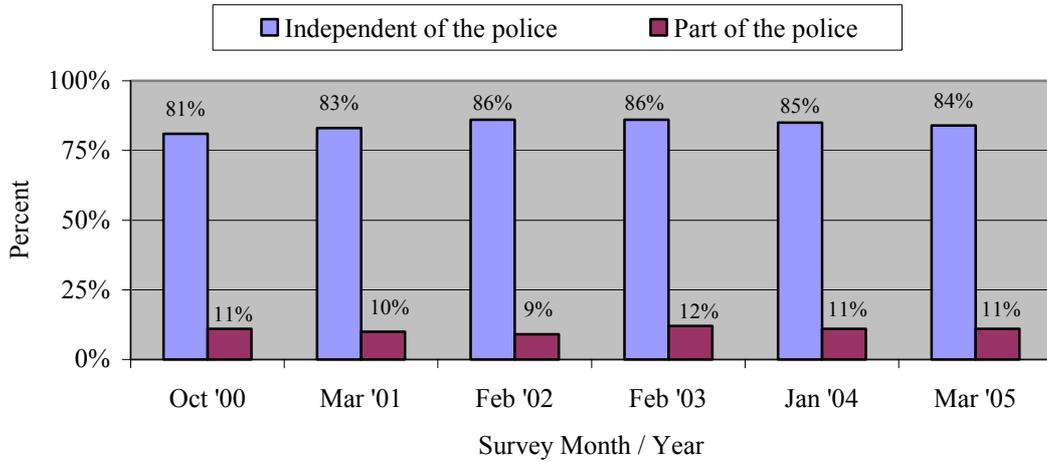
Table 4: Source of knowledge of the Police Ombudsman

Source of information	Survey Month/Year				
	Oct ‘00	Mar ‘01	Feb ‘02	Jan ‘04	Mar ‘05
Television	74%	82%	91%	93%	89%
Newspaper/magazine	35%	49%	49%	56%	43%
Radio	23%	31%	39%	44%	31%
Word of mouth	8%	8%	10%	13%	9%
Friends/family	4%	6%	8%	9%	4%
Through work	-*	6%	6%	7%	5%
Leaflet	3%	1%	4%	6%	4%
Poster	1%	1%	2%	4%	2%
Internet	-*	-*	-*	1%	1%
Attended presentation	-*	-*	-*	1%	1%
Other	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%

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

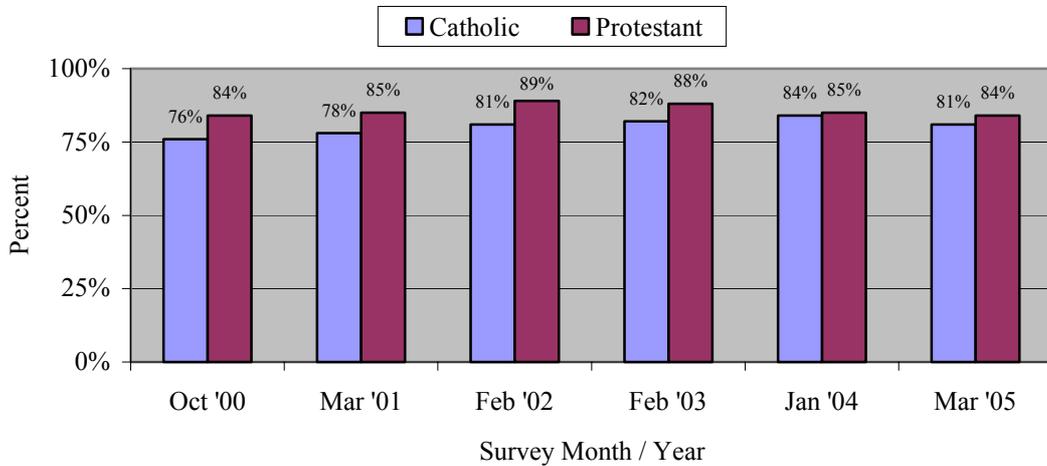
All those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman were asked for their opinion on whether or not the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police or part of the police. The majority of these respondents (84%) felt that the Police Ombudsman was independent of the police, with only 11% believing that she was part of the police. The results over time are similar to those on the awareness of the Police Ombudsman, suggesting that the maximum capacity on the awareness of the Police Ombudsman’s independence has been achieved.

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



The past two surveys have shown little difference in the awareness of independence between the Protestant community and the Catholic community. In the surveys previous to those, the Protestant community appeared to be more aware of the independence of the Police Ombudsman.

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



The levels of awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman across the different age ranges are similar to the general levels of awareness of the Police Ombudsman across the 4 main age groups. The 45 – 64 age group displayed the highest level of awareness of the Police Ombudsman’s independence from the police, while the under 25s showed the lowest level of awareness.

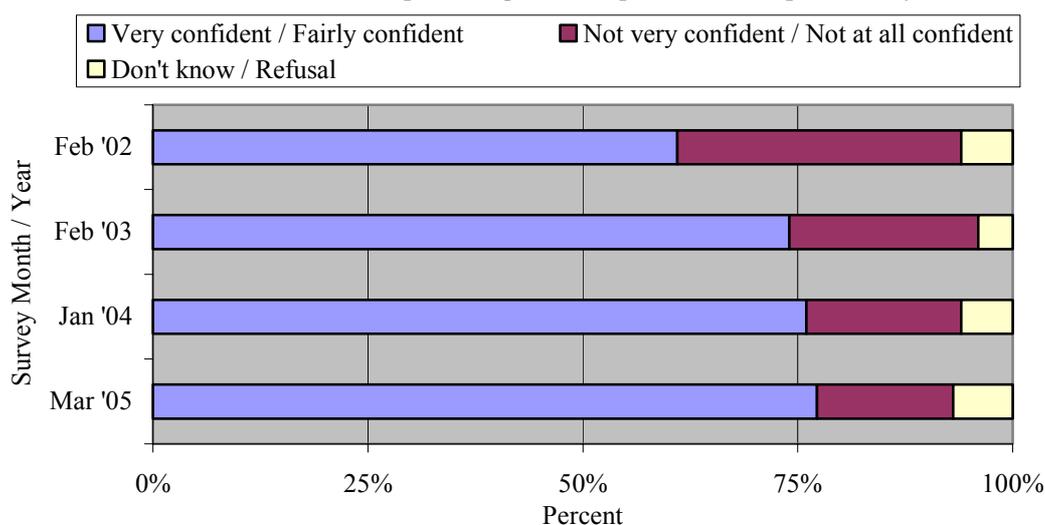
Table 5: Awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman by age group

Independence of the Police Ombudsman	Age Group			
	16 – 24	25 – 44	45 – 64	65+
Part of the police	25%	13%	7%	11%
Independent of the police	72%	83%	90%	78%
Don't know	3%	4%	4%	10%

Impartiality of Investigation

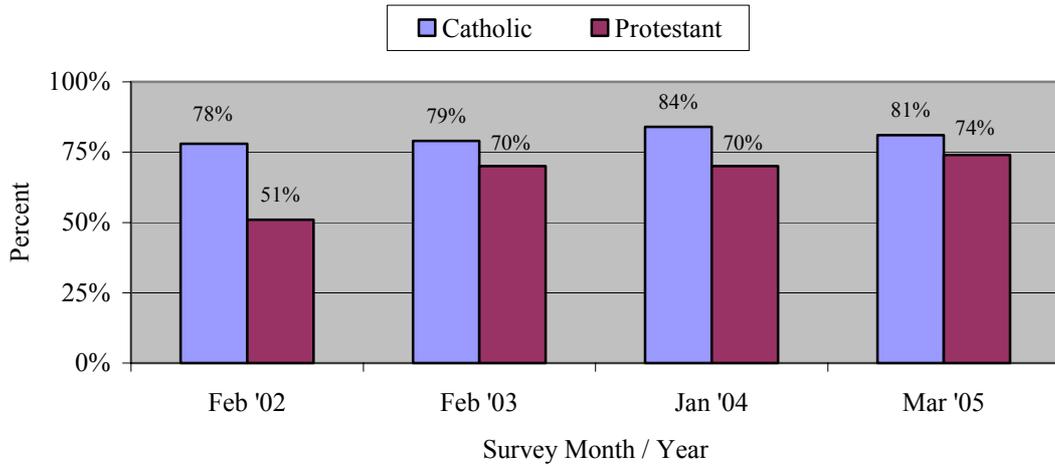
More than three quarters of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman (78%) were fairly confident or very confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints in an impartial way. Sixteen *percent* were not very confident or not at all confident of the Police Ombudsman's impartiality in investigations. Chart 9 below, shows that confidence in the impartiality of the Police Ombudsman has increased markedly since February 2002, but that the trend has also slowed down significantly.

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



There is a difference in the levels of confidence in impartiality between the two main communities in Northern Ireland. Eighty-one *percent* of Catholics and 74% of Protestants surveyed are confident that investigations are dealt with in an impartial manner. Greater Catholic confidence in the impartiality of investigations is consistent with previous years' findings, although the gap between the two communities has closed substantially from the gap that existed in 2002.

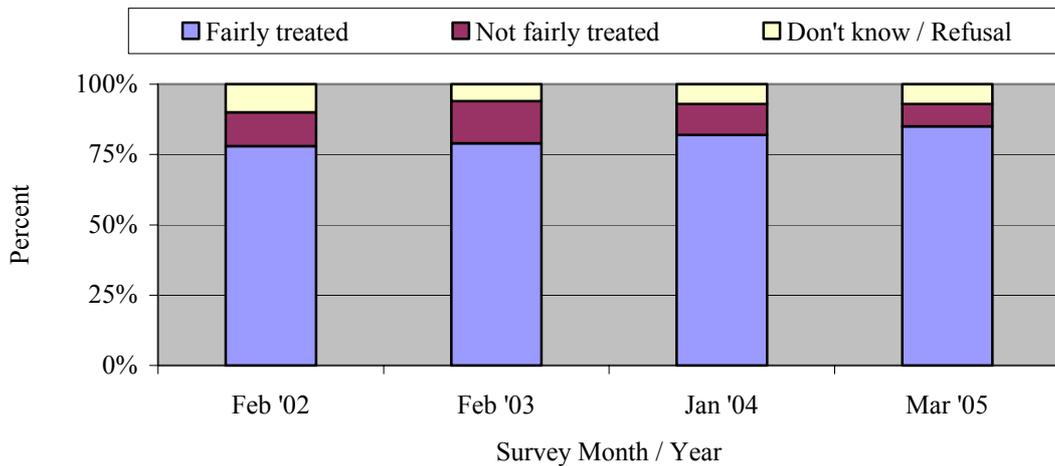
Chart 10: Confidence in impartiality of police complaints system by community background



Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers

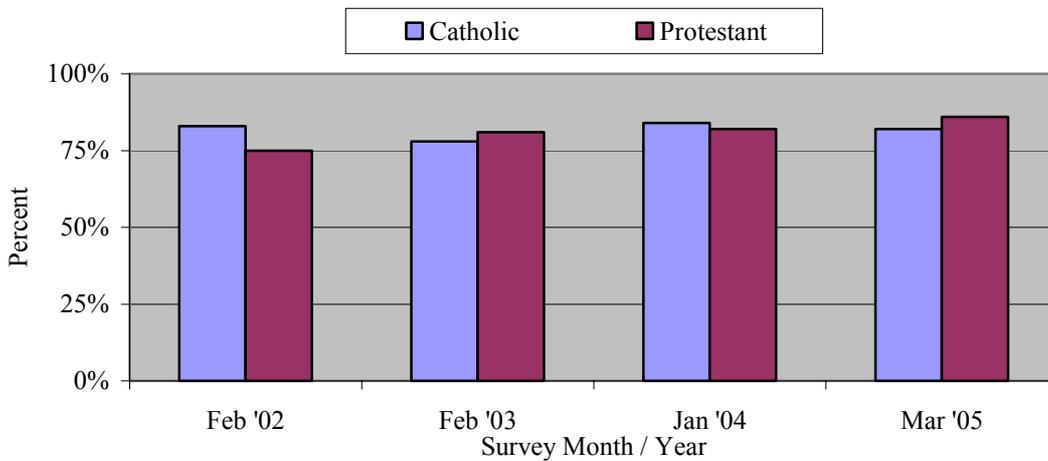
Respondents were asked how they felt complainants and police officers would be treated by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made. Eighty-five *percent* of respondents stated that they thought that they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint against a police officer. This figure has increased marginally over the past four years (as illustrated in Chart 11 below).

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 Catholic and Protestant respondents in relation to how they felt they would be treated if they made a complaint.

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

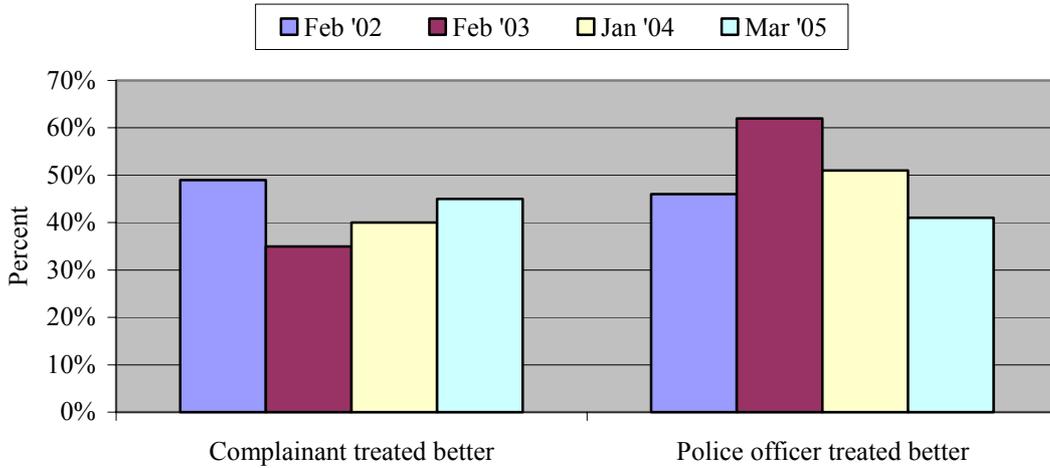


Similar results were found when respondents were asked for their thoughts on whether or not police officers would be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman. More than four-fifths of respondents (84%) felt that police officers would be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made against them. The difference between the two communities was slightly more marked than the difference between the two communities in relation to whether or not the complainant would be treated fairly, with 89% of Catholic respondents and 81% of Protestant respondents stating that they felt the police officer being complained about would be treated fairly.

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.

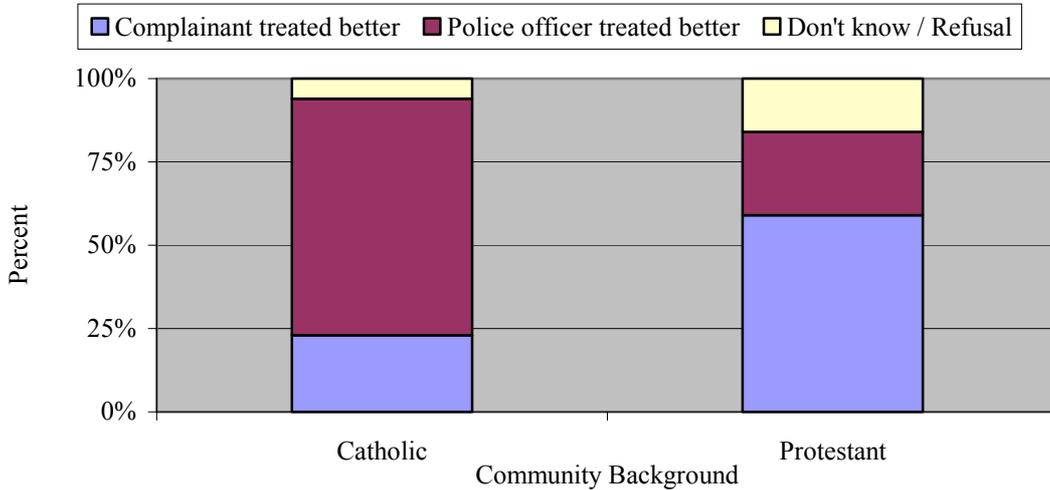
Similar proportions of respondents believed that either the police officer was treated better (41%) or the complainant was treated better (45%). These results continue the trend seen in the previous year, with the proportion of respondents who thought that the complainant would be treated better continuing to rise, and the proportion of respondents thinking that the police officer would be treated better continuing to decline (see Chart 13 below).

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



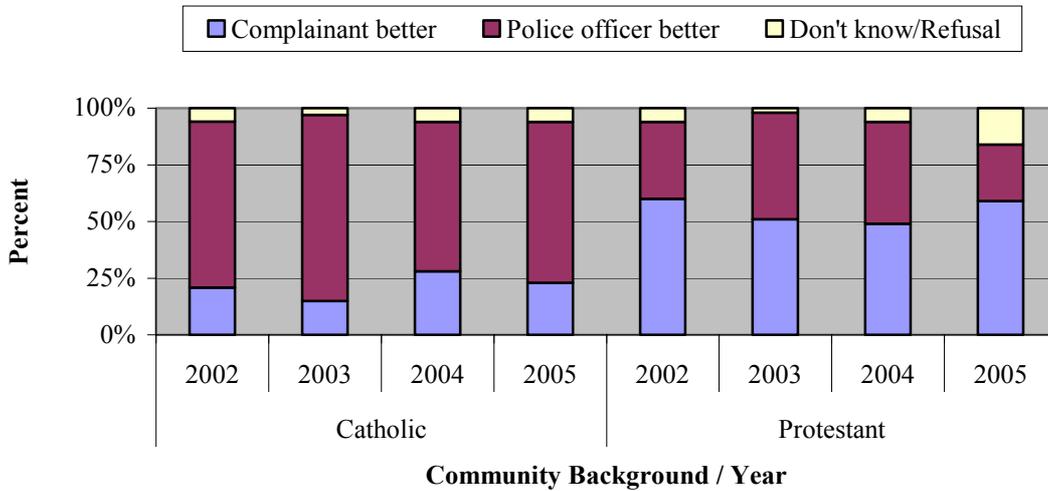
However, a high level of polarisation was found to exist between the two communities in relation to who would be treated better by the Police Ombudsman. Protestant respondents (59%) were more likely to feel that the complainant would be treated better than the police officer in question, while the opposite was true for Catholic respondents, with 71% believing that the police officer would be treated better.

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: Fairness of treatment of complainant and police officer by community background, 2002 - 2005



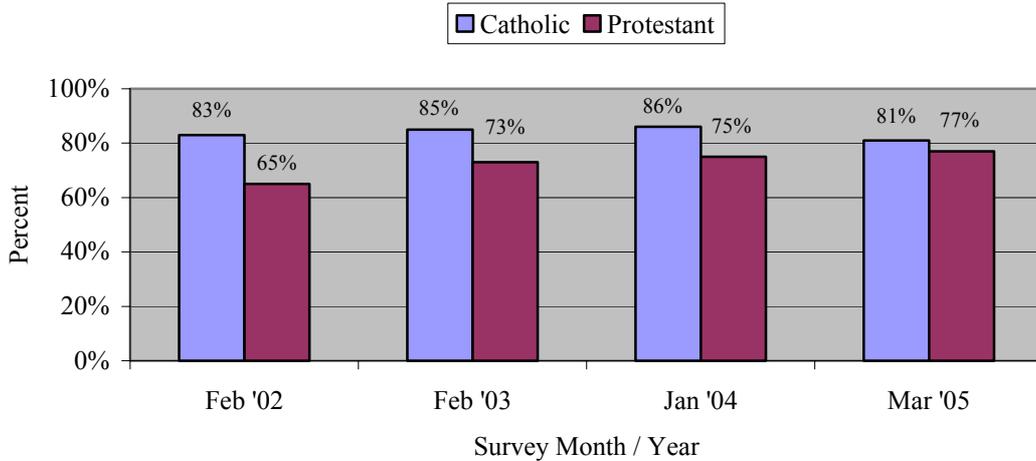
Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

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

Overall, more than three-quarters of respondents (78%) felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland will do a good job (compared to 79% in 2004), and 15% said that the Police Ombudsman would not help policing in Northern Ireland.

Catholic respondents (81%) were slightly more likely than Protestant respondents (77%) to think that the Police Ombudsman will help ensure that the police do a good job. The proportion of Protestant respondents stating this has steadily increased since February 2002 (as seen in Chart 14).

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

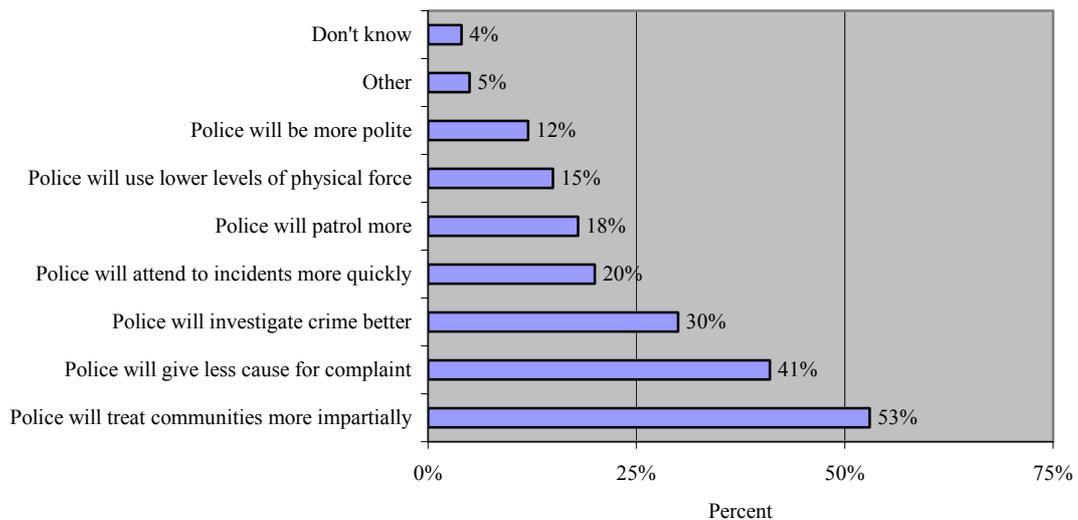


Those respondents who stated that they thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police do a good job, were asked in what way they felt the police would do a better job. The three main reasons quoted were:

- The police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially (53%)
- The police will give less cause for complaints from the public (41%)
- The police will investigate crime better (30%)

A full breakdown of the responses given is illustrated in Chart 15 below.

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



The results across the two communities are relatively similar in terms of ranking, and there is little difference in terms of magnitude. The largest proportions on both sides of the community mirror the result found for all respondents.

Generally, Catholic respondents were more likely than Protestant respondents to endorse each of the ways in which the Police Ombudsman would help the police to do a good job, i.e. 57% of Catholic respondents said that the Police Ombudsman would help the police to treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially, compared to 50% of Protestant respondents. This pattern can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6: In what way will the police do a good job because of the Police Ombudsman by Community Background

	Community Background	
	Catholic %	Protestant %
Police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially	57	50
The police will give less cause for complaints from the public	40	42
The police will investigate crime better	33	28
The police will attend to incidents more quickly	21	20
The police will patrol more	20	16
The police will use less physical force	17	13
The police will be more polite	9	15
Other	4	6
Don't know	3	4

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

Appendix:
Survey Questions

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

Appendix: Survey Questions

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

Appendix: Survey Questions

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 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

11. 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

12. (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

13. 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

Appendix: Survey Questions

14. 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