

Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland:

# Public awareness of the system for complaints against the police in Northern Ireland, 2008.

# Contents

	Page
• Executive Summary	3
• Introduction	6
• Methodology	7
• Survey findings	
Perceptions of police misconduct	8
Making complaints against the police	10
Awareness of the Police Ombudsman	11
Impartiality of Investigation	15
Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers	17
Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing	19
• Appendix 1: Survey Questions	22

# Executive Summary

## Perceptions of police misconduct

Eighty three per cent of survey respondents had never experienced unacceptable behaviour from a police officer; 12% said that they had experienced it once or twice and four per cent said that they had experienced it more frequently. The most frequently reported type of unacceptable behaviour was that a police officer had been disrespectful or impolite.

## Making complaints against the police

Eighteen per cent 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 the incident would not be taken seriously and secondly a belief that nothing would be done about their complaint.

Forty three per cent of respondents said that they would go first of all to a police station in order to make a complaint against the police; 18% 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 more likely than Protestants to say that they would go to a solicitor. Similar levels of Protestant respondents (13%) to Catholic respondents (10%) said that they would go to the Police Ombudsman.

## Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

Ninety per cent of respondents said that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman, the highest level reported to date. There was little difference in the awareness levels of Catholics and Protestants. 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 (93%).

The majority (86%) of those respondents who had heard of the Police Ombudsman thought that he was independent of the police; this figure has varied only slightly since October 2000. Twelve 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

Eighty one per cent 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 six per cent of Catholics and 78% of Protestants were confident that the Police Ombudsman deals with complaints impartially; the latter figure has risen from 51% in 2002.

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

Eighty five 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. Catholics and Protestants were equally likely to think they would be fairly treated.

Nine out of ten respondents (89%) 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 91% of Catholic respondents thinking that police officers would be treated fairly compared to 87% 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 one per cent of these thought the complainant was treated better, while 58% thought the police officer was treated better.

## Effect of Police Ombudsman on policing

More than four fifths of respondents (83%) 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 steadily increased from February 2002 to January 2006 when Catholic and Protestants had similar levels of confidence in the Police Ombudsman. However in the last two years the proportion of Protestants who thought that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police do a good job was lower than the proportion of Catholic respondents.

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.

## Statistical Significance

Statistical significance tests have been carried out on the findings and differences are reported where they have been found to be statistically significant at the 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ) level of probability (two tailed). This means that for any observed result that is found to be statistically significant one can be 95% confident that this has not happened by chance.

# 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, January 2006, January 2007 and January 2008.

This report presents the findings from the ninth survey, which was carried out in January 2008. 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;

# Methodology

Fifteen questions were commissioned by the Police Ombudsman's Office for inclusion in the January 2008 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 14 January and 16 February 2008. Interviews were achieved with 1,238 individuals, representing a response rate of 62 % 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:

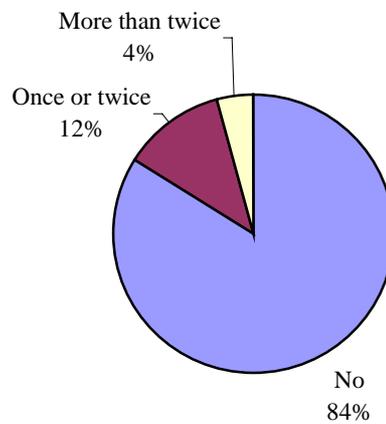
- 0%: figure in cell is less than 0.5%
- : cell is empty.

# Survey Findings

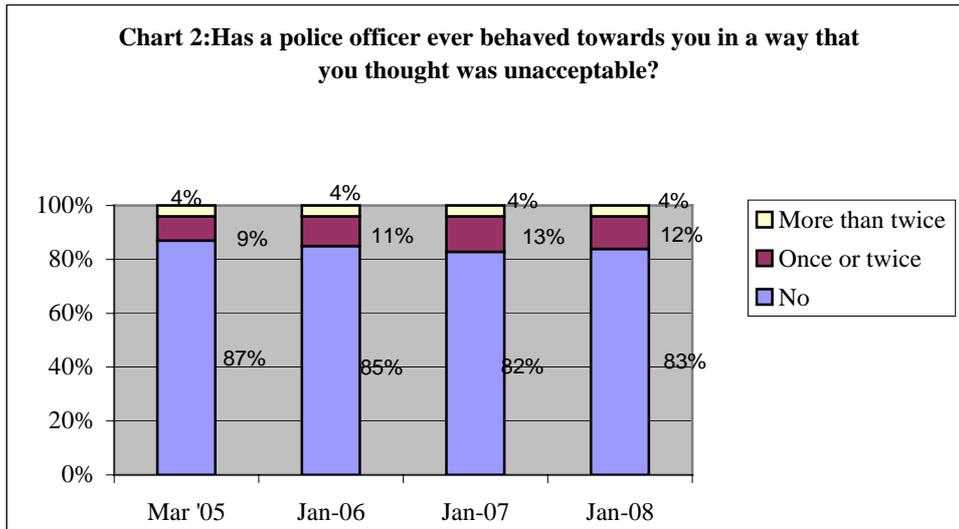
## Perceptions of police misconduct

When asked “Has a police officer ever behaved towards you in a way that you thought was unacceptable?” the majority of respondents (83%) said no, 12% said they had been treated unacceptably once or twice, and four 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?**



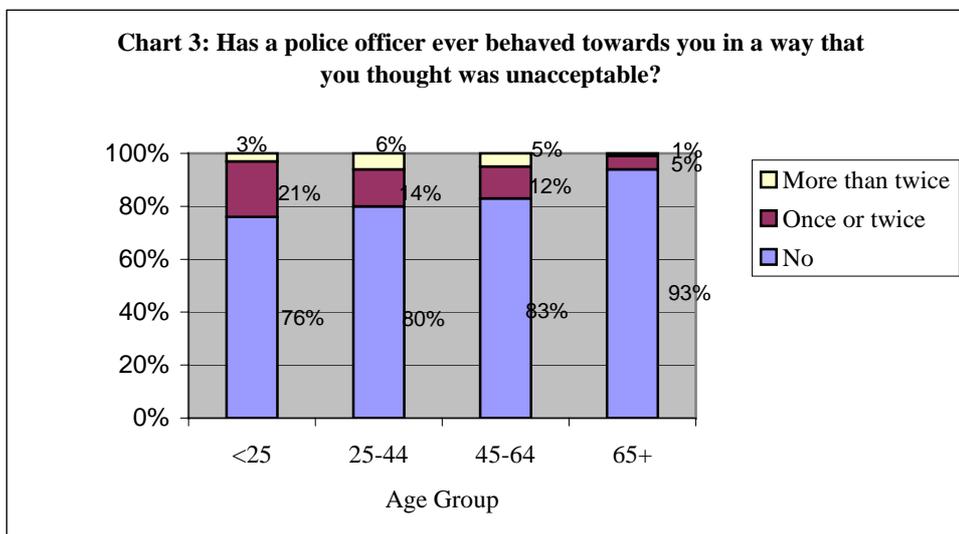
These findings are similar to the previous three years, however there has been a slight increase in the proportion of respondents who said a police officer had behaved toward them in an unacceptable way since 2005.



There was little difference in the proportion of Catholics (18%) compared to Protestants (14%) who had experienced unacceptable behaviour.

There was a marked difference in the experiences of males and females, with 24% of males stating that they had been treated unacceptably on at least one occasion, compared to 10 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 (59%). The next most common response was that the officer harassed you (21%), did not do his/her duty properly (20%) or did not follow proper procedures (19%) or swore at you (19%).

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

**Table 1: Types of unacceptable behaviour**

<b>Behaviour</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Officer was disrespectful or impolite	59
Harassment	21
Officer did not carry out their duty properly	20
Officer didn't follow proper procedures	19
Officer swore	19
Stopped or searched without reason	17
Officer was violent	16
Wrongly accused of behaviour	12
Discrimination by race, gender, age or religion	12
Officer used sectarian, racist or sexist language	7
Searched house without reason	5
Officer took an item of respondent's property	2
Other	1

(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 18% said that they had made a complaint about the incident. This proportion is similar to last year (16%).

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 a belief that it would not be taken seriously (34%), followed by nothing would be done about their complaint (32%). Only two 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 not complained about**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Felt it would not be taken seriously	34
Felt nothing would be done about the complaint	32
Incident was not serious enough	14
Could not be bothered complaining	10
Scared of police reprisals	4
Other	3
Didn't know how to complain	2
Didn't want to make trouble for the police	1
Forgot	1

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 (43%). Eleven per cent of respondents would take their complaint directly to the Police Ombudsman (similar to 13% in 2007).

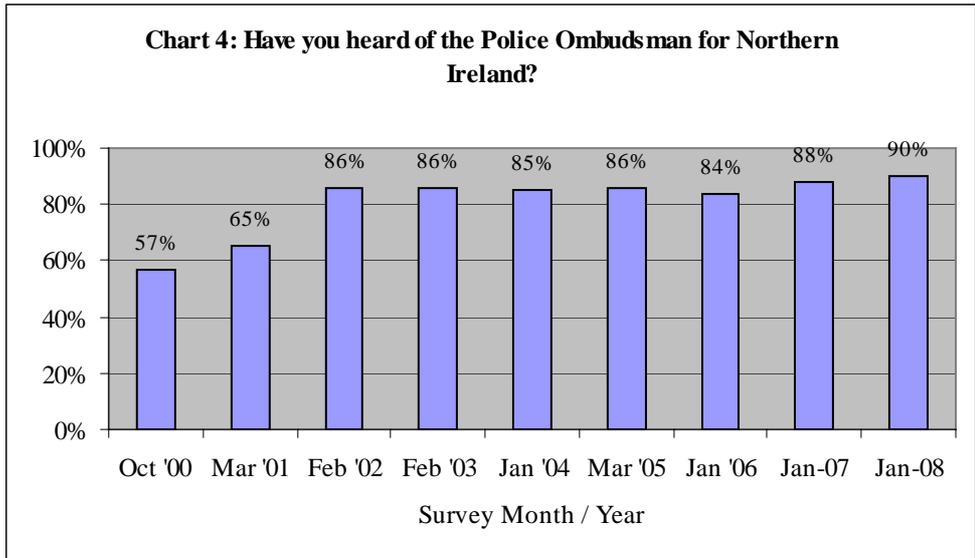
**Table 3: Where respondents would go initially to complain**

<b>Where respondents would go to complain</b>	<b>% respondents</b>
Local police station	43
Solicitor	18
Police Ombudsman	11
The Citizens Advice Bureau	6
Your MP/MLA	6
A local politician, e.g. a councillor	4
Chief Constable of the PSNI	2
The Policing Board	2
Other	1
Don't know	2
Wouldn't make a complaint	4

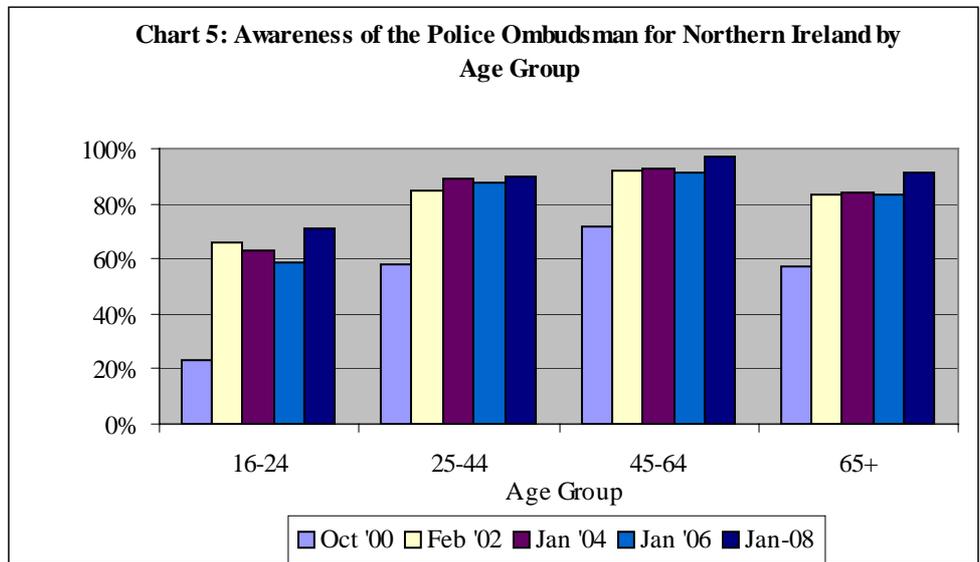
Protestants were more likely than Catholics to make their complaint at their local police station (51% compared to 33%). Similar proportions of Catholic and Protestant respondents were likely to go to the Police Ombudsman to make their complaint (13% of Protestants compared to 10% of Catholics). Catholic respondents (27%) were more likely than Protestants (12%) 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 3% of Protestants).

## Awareness of the Police Ombudsman

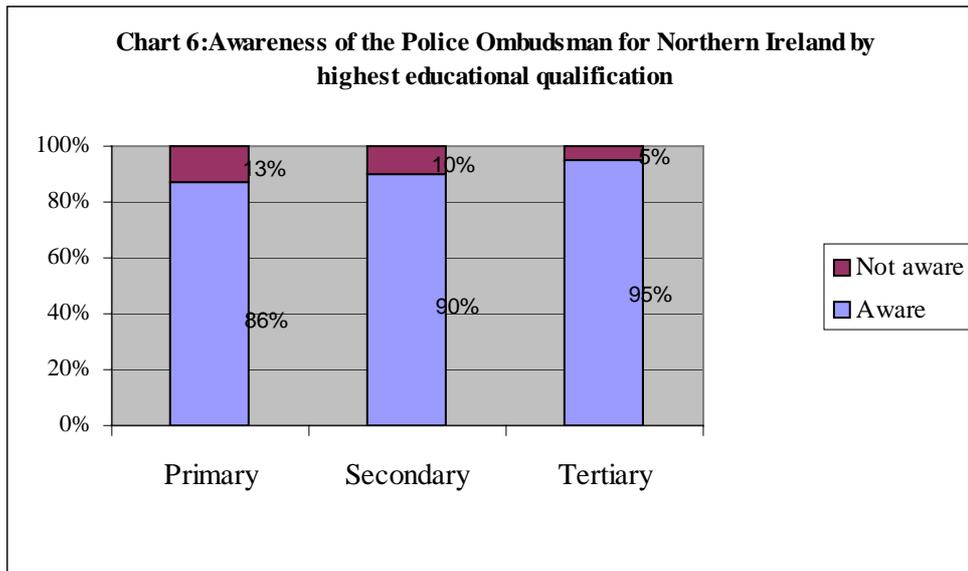
Despite only 11 % of respondents saying that they would initially go to the Police Ombudsman to make a complaint against the police, 90 % of respondents stated that they had heard of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Chart 4 shows that awareness levels have been consistently high since February 2002 and the awareness level reported in 2008 is the highest level reported to date.



Males and females were equally likely (90%) to have heard of the Police Ombudsman. There was little difference in the awareness levels of the Police Ombudsman between Catholics and Protestants (90% compared to 92%). 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 71% of respondents being aware. (Chart 5).



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).



When asked how they had heard about the Police Ombudsman, over nine out of ten respondents (93%) 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	Feb 02	Jan 04	Jan 06	Jan 08
Television	74	91	93	90	93
Newspaper/ Magazine	35	49	56	49	50
Radio	23	39	44	40	42
Word of mouth	8	10	13	12	12
Friends/ Family	4	8	9	7	7
Through work	-*	6	7	7	7
Leaflet	3	4	6	7	4
Poster	1	2	4	3	4
Internet	-*	-*	1	3	3
Attended presentation	-*	-*	1	1	1
Other	3	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 12%

believing that he 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).

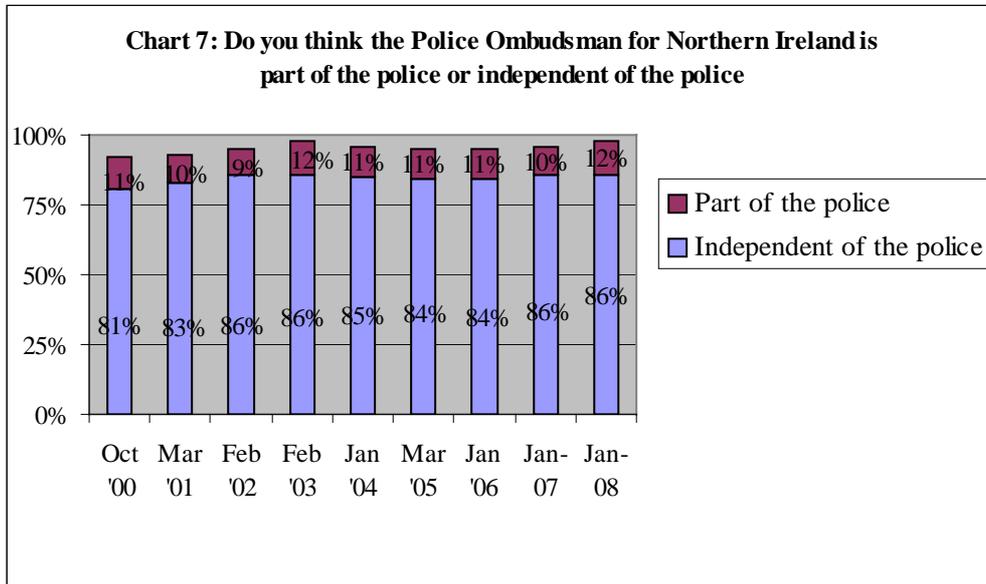
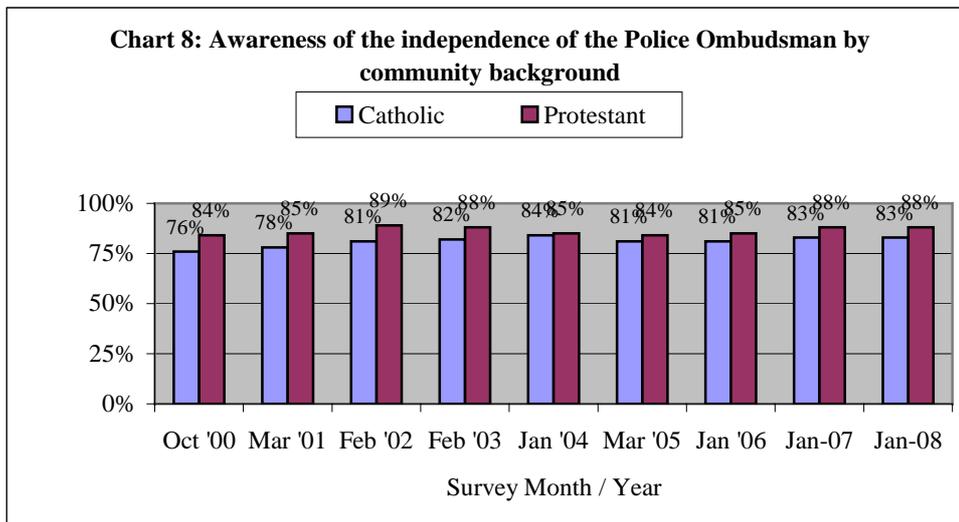


Chart 8 shows the differences in awareness of the independence of the Police Ombudsman between Catholics and Protestants. The current survey shows that in 2008 Protestants were more likely than Catholics to be aware of the office's independence.



Respondents aged between 45 and 64 displayed the highest level of awareness of the Police Ombudsman’s independence from the police (88%), while the under 25s showed the lowest level of awareness (68%).

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

Independence of the Police Ombudsman	% respondents in Age Group			
	16 – 24	25 – 44	45 – 64	65+
Part of the police	29	14	8	6
Independent of the police	68	84	89	88
Don’t know	3	1	2	6

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. Forty five per cent would use the telephone directory. Twenty five per cent would use the Internet and 15% would go to a police station (Table 6).

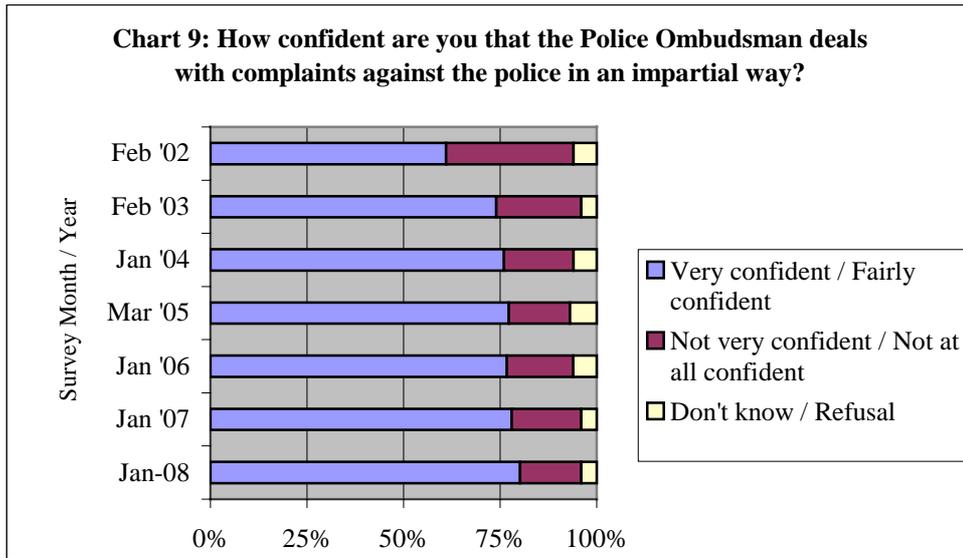
**Table 6: Source of information for contacting the Police Ombudsman’s Office**

Where one would go to find contact details for the Police Ombudsman	% of respondents
Telephone directory	45
Internet	25
Police station	15
Directory enquiries	8
Advice agency	6
Political representative	5
Legal representative	4
Call at office	3
Community association	2
Other	2
Don’t know	8

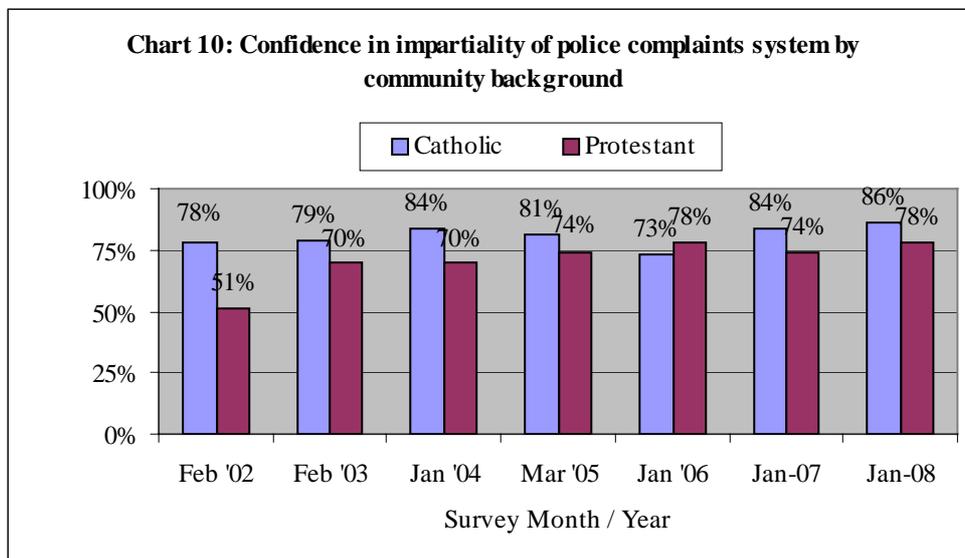
Note: Percentages add to more than 100 as respondents could give more than one response)

## Impartiality of Investigation

Eighty one 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. Sixteen 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.

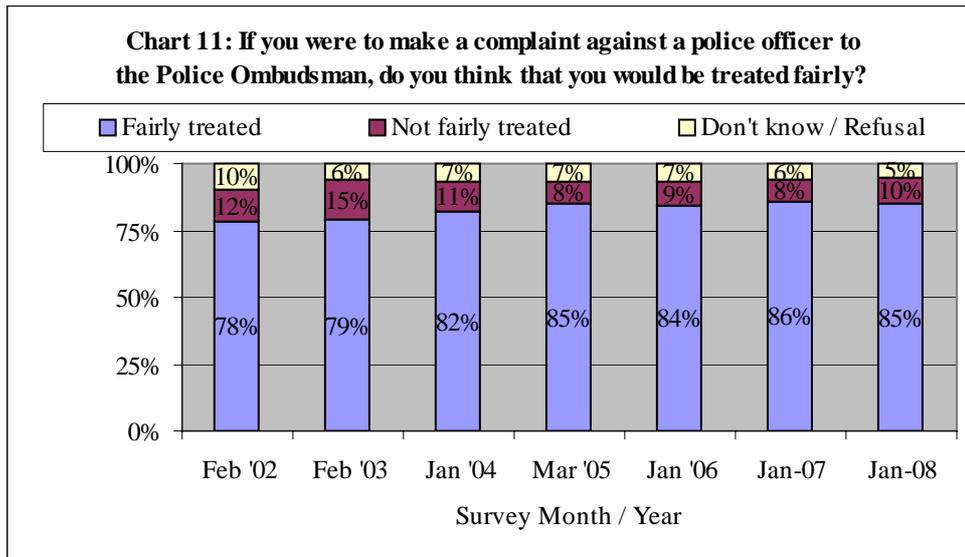


Over the period from February 2002 until January 2008 the level of confidence has risen from 51% to 78% among Protestants and from 78% to 86% among Catholics. In 2008 a higher proportion of Catholic respondents were therefore confident that investigations are dealt with in an impartial manner. This is consistent with previous years except for in 2006 when confidence in impartiality among Catholics fell to 73% compared to 78% among Protestants.

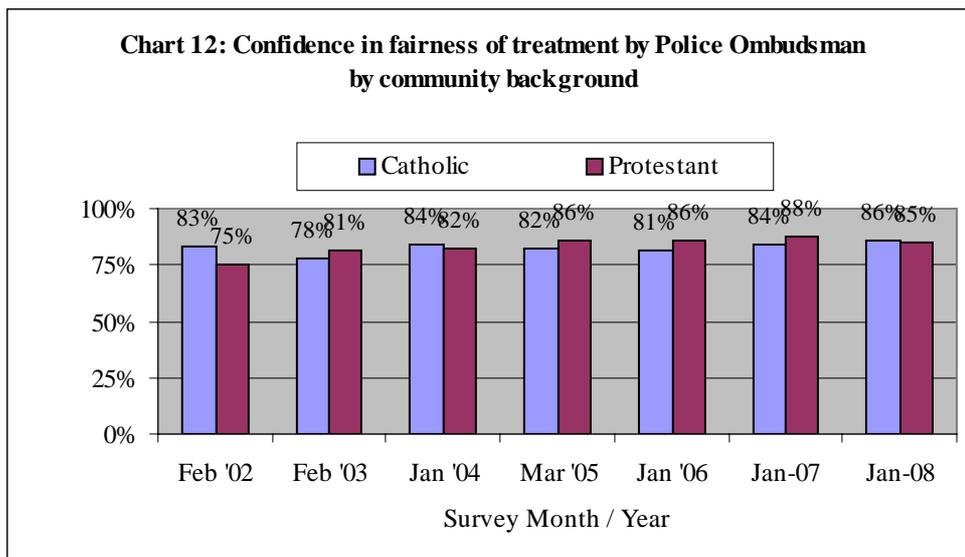


## Fairness and equality of treatment of complainant and police officers

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 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 increased between 2002 and 2008.



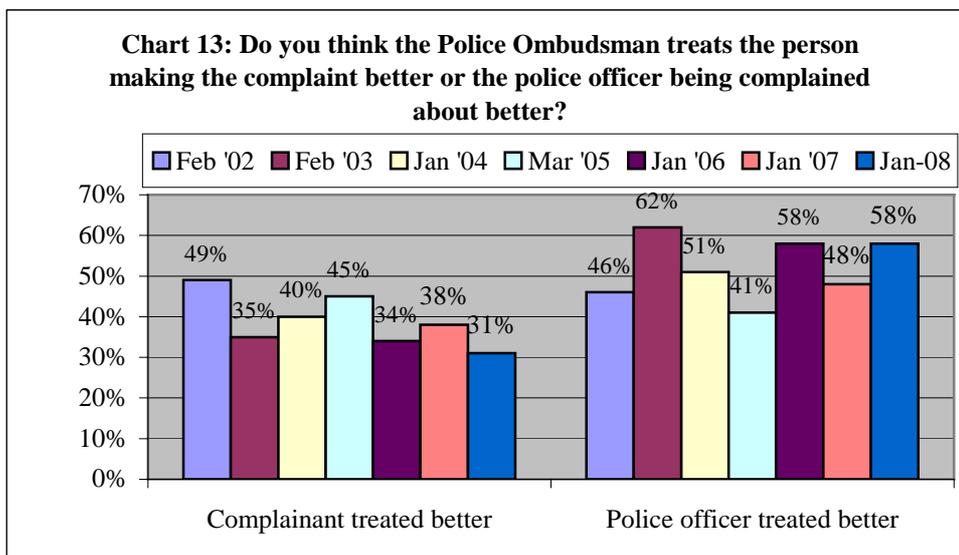
Further analysis of responses to this question shows that Catholics and Protestants were equally likely to think they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint. (86% of Catholics compared to 85% of Protestants thought they would be treated fairly).



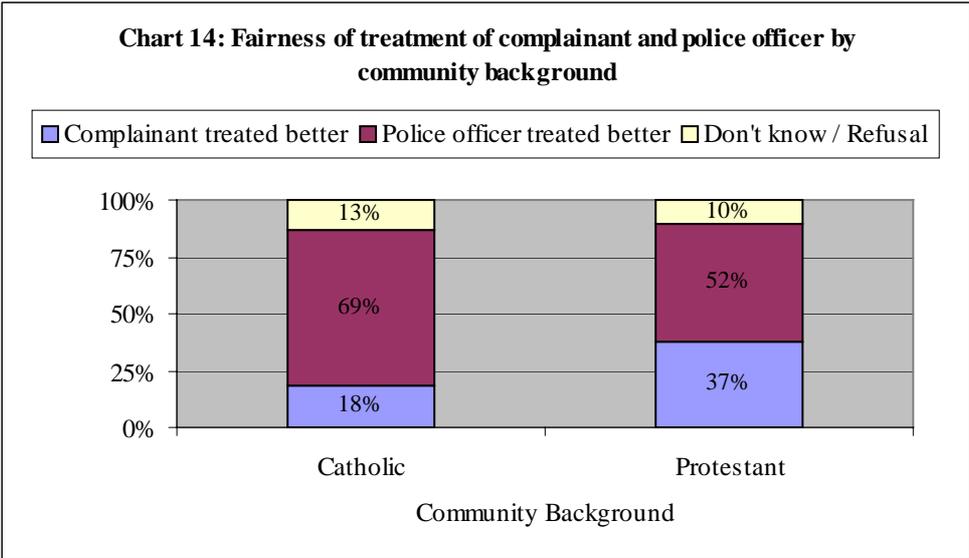
Similar results were found when respondents were asked for their views on whether or not police officers would be treated fairly by the Police Ombudsman in the event of a complaint being made against them. Catholic respondents were slightly more likely to think that the police officer would be treated fairly than Protestant respondents (91% compared to 87%).

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 one per cent of these respondents believed that the complainant would be treated better, while 58% felt that the police officer would be treated 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 (37%) were more likely than Catholics (18%) 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 % believing that the police officer would be treated better, compared to 52 % of Protestants.



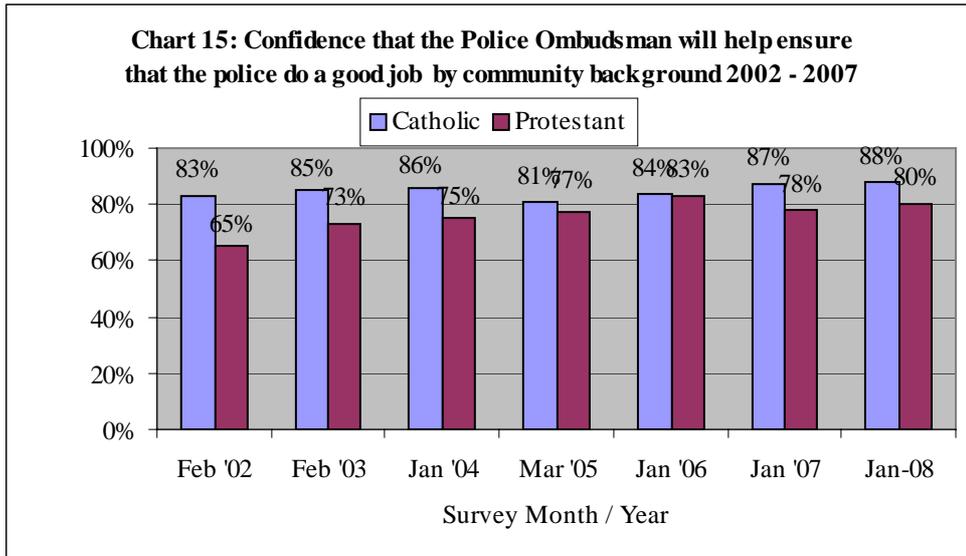
The trend evidenced by the results is similar in nature to those seen in previous years, although the magnitude of the differential has changed over the years. However, these findings should be treated with some caution, as the respondent base is small.

## 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 policing would be improved due to the impact of the Police Ombudsman.

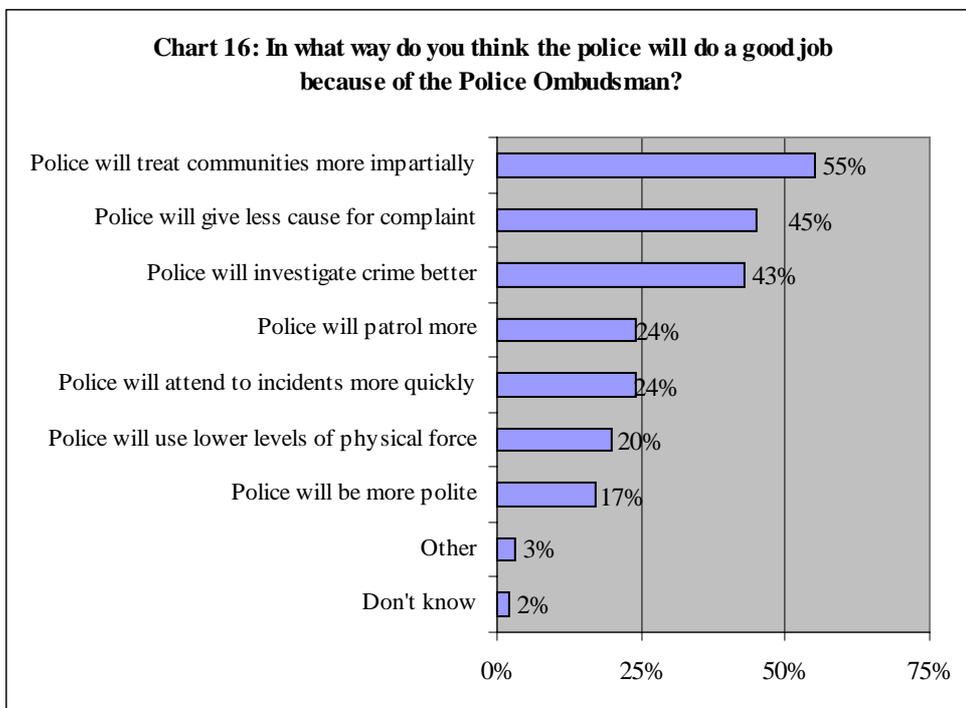
Overall, more than four fifths of respondents (83%) felt that the Police Ombudsman would help ensure that the police in Northern Ireland will do a good job (82% in 2007), and 11% said that the Police Ombudsman would not help policing in Northern Ireland.

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 two years confidence among Protestants has been lower than Catholic respondents – 88% Catholics compared to 80% of Protestants thought the Police Ombudsman would help the police do a good job.



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 (55%);
- the police will give less cause for complaints from the public (45%);
- the police will investigate crime better (43%).



A full breakdown of the responses given is illustrated in Chart 16 above.

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**

Ways police will do a good job	Community Background % respondents	
	Catholic	Protestant
Police will treat all communities in Northern Ireland more impartially	57	53
The police will give less cause for complaints from the public	41	47
The police will investigate crime better	47	39
The police will patrol more	23	24
The police will attend to incidents more quickly	23	24
The police will be more polite	19	16
The police will use less physical force	23	17
Other	2	2
Don't know	2	2

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

# Appendix

## **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. (If yes at 6) 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. (If yes at 6) 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 yes at 6) 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 yes at 6) 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 yes at 6) 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. (If yes at 6) 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. (If yes at 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

**Additional copies of this and other publications are available from:**

Policy and Practice Directorate  
Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland  
New Cathedral Buildings  
St. Anne's Square  
11 Church Street  
Belfast  
BT1 1PG

**Telephone:** 028 9082 8648

**Fax:** 028 9082 8605

**Textphone:** 028 9082 8756

**Witness Appeal Line:** 0800 0327 880

**Email:** [research@policeombudsman.org](mailto:research@policeombudsman.org)

These publications and other information about the work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland are also available on the Internet at:

Website: [www.policeombudsman.org](http://www.policeombudsman.org)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE