

## CHAPTER 9

PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME  
AND JUSTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

Crime and justice are a mainstay of media and popular discussion in Australia – few topics reflect the moral sensibilities of a nation as much as crime and punishment. Beliefs and opinions about crime are shaped by widespread consumption of news and entertainment about crimes, police, courts and prisons. Attitudes about crime and justice reflect judgments about social threats and harms, and perceptions of personal safety as well as beliefs about criminal offenders. Over the last 20 years, advanced democracies have become preoccupied with crime and embraced greater levels of control.<sup>1</sup> This movement has been described as a ‘culture of control’ by David Garland (2001), one of the foremost commentators in the field. Garland draws on contemporary research on attitudes to crime and justice, which reveal two competing emotional responses: anger and fear. As Roberts et al. (2003) point out, both media and politicians have a role to play in this culture, exploiting fear and misunderstandings about crime for votes and ratings.<sup>2</sup>

Gauging attitudes to crime and justice is a well-established area of study in both North America<sup>3</sup> and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system in Australia have been the subject of a limited number of surveys and scholarly reviews since the 1970s (see Wilson & Brown 1973; Broadhurst & Indermaur 1982; Walker, Collins & Wilson 1988; Indermaur 1987, 1990). These studies have measured general punitiveness of citizens, the relative seriousness of crimes, and knowledge about crime and justice as well as testing participant response to additional information (Indermaur 1987, 1990).

Two main findings emerge out of Australian research on the public's knowledge and perceptions of crime and criminal justice. First, research shows that most Australians are dissatisfied with current sentencing practices and are punitive about sentencing. Second, the public has a distorted view of crime and punishment, overestimating the level of violent crime and underestimating the current severity of sentences (Indermaur 1987, 1990; Weatherburn, Matka & Lind 1996; Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004). Although only a small proportion (less than 10 per cent) of crimes recorded by the police involve violence, most of the time respondents answer questions about sentencing with serious violent offenders in mind.<sup>5</sup> These findings have also been made for other advanced democracies.

In this chapter, we explore Australian perceptions of crime and criminal justice using questions in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003 (Gibson et al. 2004). The National Social Science Survey and the Australian Election Study (AES) are general surveys that also contain crime-related questions that track attitudes about crime and justice. Here, we use all these surveys to give us an idea of how national attitudes have changed over time. This chapter focuses on public perceptions of crime, and how the media influences these perceptions. We seek to discover how accurate public perceptions of crime rates are, and how respondents' media use might influence the accuracy of perceptions. We then examine attitudes about integrity of key institutions of criminal justice, particularly confidence in the police force, the courts and current sentencing practices. We get some clear focus on the latter by looking at bellwether topics like decriminalising marijuana use and the death penalty.

### ARE PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME RATES ACCURATE?

AuSSA 2003 asks respondents if they believe that crime has increased or decreased or stayed the same over the past two years. This question allows us to test the accuracy of public knowledge about crime trends. The results (see table 9.1) indicate clearly that more than two-thirds of survey respondents (70 per cent) believe that crime has increased over the past two years, with more than a third overall (39 per cent) responding that it had increased 'a lot'.

We can compare these results with actual crime trends reported to the police over the two-year period from 2001 to 2003.<sup>6</sup> The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes national and state-level data on nine major

**Table 9.1 Perceptions of crime trends between 2001 and 2003 by state, per cent**

	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Stayed the same	Decreased a little	Decreased a lot	Can't choose
Western Australia (n = 380)	54	30	12	2	2	1
New South Wales (n = 1374)	44	32	19	2	1	2
Queensland (n = 681)	42	30	22	2	1	2
South Australia (n = 370)	41	37	17	2	1	2
ACT (n = 76)	34	30	25	5	0	5
Northern Territory (n = 15)	33	33	13	7	7	7
Tasmania (n = 119)	31	34	23	9	1	3
Victoria (n = 1065)	26	29	29	10	1	5
Total (n = 4123)	39	31	21	4	1	3

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

categories of crimes reported to the police. The national crime rate per 100 000 persons for each of the nine categories for 2001 and 2003 is presented in table 9.2. For six of the nine major categories of criminal offences, police-recorded rates of crime in Australia *declined* between 2001 and 2003. Recorded rates of crime fell for homicide and related offences, kidnapping/abduction, robbery, unlawful entry with intent, motor vehicle theft and other theft. Marginal increases in rates of crime were recorded for three categories of offences usually not reported to police: assault (2 per cent), sexual assault (5 per cent) and blackmail/extortion (6 per cent) (ABS 2004). The pattern that emerges, then, is one of *decreasing* crime: almost all categories recorded declines with significant falls in the high-incidence category of property crime.<sup>7</sup> The relatively small number of cases of the most serious crime – homicide – also dropped.<sup>8</sup>

Given these trends, the most accurate response to the question would be to indicate a *decrease* in crime levels during the past two years. However, only one in 20 respondents hold this assessment of criminal activity. Using a slightly more generous measure of respondent accuracy – that crimes are falling or stable – we still find that only a quarter of respondents hold accurate views about crime trends.

**Table 9.2** Police recorded crime rates (per 100 000 persons) in Australia by offence category, 2001 and 2003

Offence category	Rate per 100 000 persons		
	2001	2003	Change (per cent)
Motor vehicle theft	720.7	497.1	-31
Robbery	137	99.2	-28
Unlawful entry with intent	2 244.9	1 777.9	-21
Homicide and related offences	5.5	4.7	-12
Other theft	3 607	3 214.3	-11
Kidnapping/abduction	4	3.6	-10
Blackmail/extortion	1.8	1.9	+ 6
Sexual assault	87.1	91.7	+ 5
Assault	784.5	798	+ 2

SOURCE Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004)

Perceptions of crime trends vary substantially across states, with Western Australians least accurate in their perceptions and Victorians most. One possible explanation for the difference between actual crime trends and the public perceptions may be differences in crime trends at the state level. We test this by comparing trends in crime rates by state. For each state with full crime data available, we calculated the number of major categories (out of a possible nine) with declines in recorded crimes. The results are presented in table 9.3, along with the corresponding percentage of respondents who think that crime trends are stable or decreasing. The results indicate no consistent relationship between actual and perceived crime trends across states. For example, Western Australia, one of the states with the most categories of crime decreasing over the two-year period, has the *lowest* proportion of respondents who believe that crime is stable or decreasing. The absence of any

**Table 9.3** Crime trends versus perceptions of crime trends over same period, 2001–2003

State	Categories of crime decreasing	Perception that crime is stable or decreasing
	n	per cent
Western Australia	8	15
Victoria	8	40
Queensland	7	25
South Australia	6	20
New South Wales	6	22

SOURCES Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004); The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

relationship reinforces our earlier claim that public perceptions of crime rates are generally not based on actual crime rates.

AuSSA 2003 also asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with the statement that 'Immigrants increase crime rates'. This question is useful for tapping prejudices as well as the misperceptions in the community that drive attitudes to crime. The most authoritative and recent Australian research on this topic (Mukherjee 1999) reviewed the research in this area, finding no direct link between immigration and crime. Studies in the United States have also found no relationship between the number of immigrants and crime rates (Butcher & Piehl 1998). Indeed, in direct contrast to the view that immigrants increase crime rates, there is some evidence that immigrants are less likely to be criminally active than native-born Americans (Bucher & Piehl 1998; Mears 2001). Despite little evidence supporting a link between immigration and crime, almost a third (31 per cent) of respondents agree that immigrants increase crime rates, with 41 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (see table 9.4). (See also chapter 11 for attitudes to immigration.)

**Table 9.4 Agreement that immigrants increase crime rates by demographic characteristics, 2003, per cent**

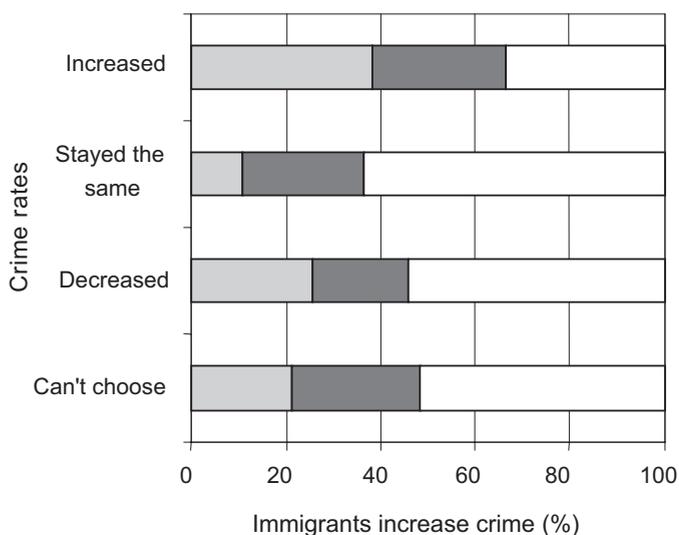
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose
<b>Sex</b>						
Female (n = 1070)	10	19	24	28	16	4
Male (n = 956)	12	22	24	25	14	3
<b>Age</b>						
18–34 (n = 335)	9	11	30	27	20	2
35–49 (n = 625)	10	17	24	28	20	2
50–64 (n = 609)	10	24	20	29	14	3
65 and over (n = 449)	15	26	26	21	7	6
<b>Education</b>						
Less than Year 12 (n = 648)	15	24	25	23	8	4
Year 12 (n = 225)	9	18	25	29	16	3
Trade/Apprenticeship (n = 239)	17	24	27	25	5	3
Certificate/Diploma (n = 427)	9	23	26	25	13	3
Bachelor's degree & above (n = 447)	3	11	18	33	33	3
<b>Total (n = 2058)</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>3</b>

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

Respondent views about the relationship between immigrants and crime strongly correspond to general perceptions of crime rates. Those who believe that crime rates have remained stable or decreased are also less likely to agree that immigrants increase crime: just 14 per cent agree with this proposition. Among those who believe that crime has increased, 37 per cent agree that immigrants increase crime (see figure 9.1).

We further investigate perceptions of crime by particular demographic groups in Australian society and find that men, younger respondents, and the more highly educated hold more accurate perceptions of actual crime trends (see table 9.5). This pattern is broadly similar to results shown in table 9.4, which reports agreement with the statement that immigrants increase crime rates by demographic groups. However, men, who generally hold more accurate perceptions of crime trends, are slightly more likely to agree that immigrants increase crime rates. Again, younger and more qualified respondents are less likely to link immigrants with crime, with only two in ten of those aged 18–34 agreeing with the proposition (compared to four in ten aged 65 and over), and just one in seven of those with a university

**Figure 9.1** Agreement that immigrants increase crime rates by perceptions of crime rates, 2003, per cent



SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

**Table 9.5 Perception of crime by demographics, 2003, per cent**

	Increased a lot	Increased a little	Stayed the same	Decreased a little	Decreased a lot	Can't choose
Sex						
Female (n = 2164)	43	30	19	3	1	4
Male (n = 1928)	34	32	25	5	1	2
Age						
18–34 (n = 709)	25	35	30	5	1	4
35–49 (n = 1254)	36	32	23	4	1	3
50–64 (n = 1248)	41	29	21	5	2	3
65 and over (n = 870)	51	30	13	3	1	2
Education						
Less than Year 12 (n = 1279)	52	27	14	2	1	3
Year 12 (n = 471)	34	34	23	4	2	3
Trade/Apprenticeship (n = 493)	38	33	21	6	1	1
Certificate/Diploma (n = 874)	40	33	19	5	1	2
Bachelor's degree & above (n = 903)	20	35	35	6	1	4

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

degree agreeing (compared to four in ten not completing Year 12 or holding a trade certificate).

These results confirm findings from previous surveys conducted in New South Wales and Western Australia (Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004) that suggest the public is not well informed about actual trends in crime, either at a nation or state level. Older and less qualified respondents hold the most inaccurate perceptions of criminal activity in Australia. Evidence suggests that what drives these general perceptions is not the *reality* of crime but the *reporting* of crime (see Roberts & Stalans 1997; Chiricos, Eschholz & Gertz 1997). This is not surprising, since the media is the public's main source of information on crime.<sup>9</sup> So any understanding of public perceptions must equally examine the ways media treats crime, and how the public assimilates the reporting of crime.

## HOW DOES MEDIA USE AFFECT BELIEFS ABOUT CRIME TRENDS?

To understand the interaction between the media and crime perceptions, we must first examine basic data about how respondents use the media. Previous research points to the influence of the media on perceptions of crime and justice.<sup>10</sup> As we show in table 9.6, the accuracy of perceptions about crime varies according to the main source of media that respondents rely on. Those who rely on Internet sites for their news and information are most likely to believe that crime rates are stable or falling, while those who rely on talkback radio, family and friends or commercial television are least likely to believe this. Agreement that immigrants increase crime rates is highest among respondents who rely on talkback radio (50 per cent) and commercial television (37 per cent) as their main source of news and information. Television is likely to contribute to any public misperception about crime levels and criminals because of its overall popularity (see chapter 13) and is particularly so among respondents with fewer qualifications.

Of course, unpacking the 'cause and effect' of media is complex. While the media may feed negative stories and images to viewers, individuals are likely to seek out media sources that accord with their pre-existing opinions and beliefs. What is most likely, then, is that individual views and audience-maximising media programming amplify each other through synergistic selection and reinforcement.

**Table 9.6** Perceptions of crime by major source of news and information, 2003, per cent

Media relied on most for news and information	Per cent with accurate perceptions of crime rates	Per cent disagree that immigration increases crime rates
Internet sites	44	67
ABC and or SBS television	34	55
Radio	31	41
Newspapers and news magazines	29	41
Talkback radio	21	25
Commercial television	20	33
Friends and family	17	55
Total	27	42
n	(4075)	(2034)

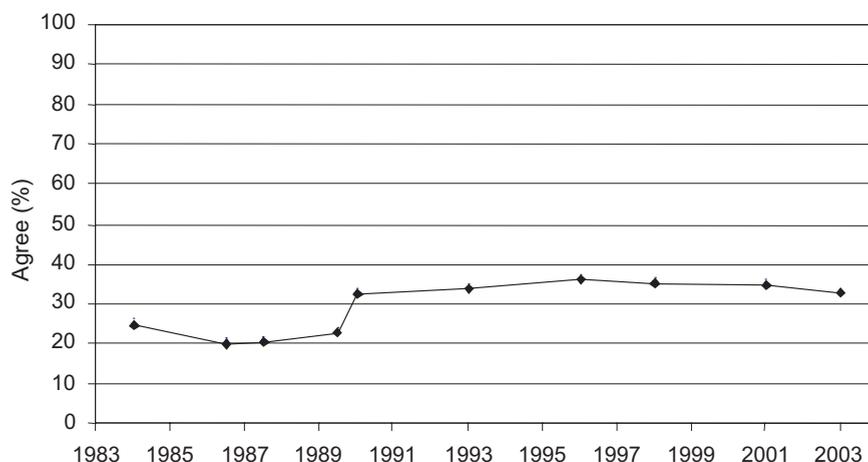
SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

## WHAT SHOULD COUNT AS A CRIME?

Australians hold divergent views about what behaviour is acceptable, and defining behaviour as criminal is often fiercely contested. These debates are nowhere more intense than over 'victimless' crimes, such as those that involve the personal choice to consume drugs. One debate along these lines concerns the personal use of marijuana. AuSSA 2003 asks respondents whether they agree that smoking marijuana should *not* be a criminal offence. Almost a third (32 per cent) agree. This figure is particularly interesting: official statistics indicate that about one-third of Australians have used marijuana, with approximately 1.2 million Australians using the drug in any one month (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2002). A further one in five AuSSA 2003 respondents do not have a view either way on decriminalisation, and about half (49 per cent) disagree. Comparing this with earlier survey findings, these results indicate that support for decriminalising marijuana use has remained relatively steady over the past decade after a slight dip in support in the second half of the 1980s (see figure 9.2).

One controversy in the marijuana decriminalisation debate is about whether prohibition deters new marijuana users and moderates consumption among existing users (Weatherburn & Jones 2001; Weatherburn, Jones & Donnelly 2003). Across Australia, all states

**Figure 9.2** Agree that smoking marijuana should not be a criminal offence, 1984–2003, per cent



**SOURCES** National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

**Table 9.7 Agree that smoking marijuana should not be a criminal offence by state, 2003, per cent**

State	Penalties	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
ACT (n = 77)	civil	48	13	39
Queensland (n = 700)	diversion to treatment	34	19	47
Western Australia (n = 383)	civil*	34	17	49
Tasmania (n = 119)	cautioning	32	26	42
Victoria (n = 1083)	cautioning	31	21	48
South Australia (n = 375)	civil	31	21	48
New South Wales (n = 1400)	cautioning	30	17	53
Northern Territory (n = 15)	civil	27	33	40
Australia (n = 4152)		32	19	49

\* cautioning and diversion at time survey was conducted

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

prohibit marijuana use; however, the penalties for smoking marijuana vary widely. Four states and territories (South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Western Australia) now provide civil rather than criminal penalties for minor cannabis offences. Three states (Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales) provide formal cautions for the first two or three offences if only small quantities of cannabis are involved. Queensland provides mandatory assessment and a brief intervention session (Lenton 2004). Are these differences reflected in state-level public opinion? When we examine support for the decriminalisation of marijuana use by state, we find no consistent relationship between penalties and public opinion (see table 9.7). It is likely, therefore, that reforms to these laws are a product of political leadership rather than the pressure of public opinion. Conversely, legal reform is perhaps yet to shift public attitudes.

## HOW SATISFIED ARE AUSTRALIANS WITH THE POLICE?

Police play a leading role in the criminal justice system, responsible for protecting the community, maintaining public order, enforcing criminal

laws and investigating crimes. Public confidence in the police is especially important because police rely on the public's co-operation and assistance to undertake their work. But how satisfied are Australians with their police forces? As we shall see below, Australian attitudes to the police are quite contradictory.

AuSSA 2003 asks two questions about attitudes to the police. First, respondents are asked how much confidence they have in the police in their state or territory. The results indicate that one in eight (13 per cent) have 'a great deal', and more than half (57 per cent) have 'quite a lot' of confidence in the police in their jurisdiction. A further two in ten (23 per cent) have 'not very much' confidence and only one in 20 (5 per cent) have 'no' confidence at all. The results of a second question asking about police corruption, however, provide a different perspective. Only one in four *disagree* that there is a lot of corruption in their state/territory police force. No doubt these findings reflect media coverage of numerous royal commissions and inquiries into police forces over the past two decades, including the Fitzgerald Inquiry into Police and Political Corruption in Queensland in 1987, the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police in 1997 and the Kennedy Royal Commission into corrupt or criminal conduct by Western Australian Police Officers in 2004. Findings of deep-seated corruption across commissions and enquiries led Kennedy (2004, p. 56) to remark that 'police corruption is an inevitable and universal characteristic of a police service'.

Perceptions of corruption vary by state, with respondents in Western Australia (44 per cent) and New South Wales (37 per cent) most likely to agree that there is a lot of corruption in the police force in their states. The same states also record the lowest levels of confidence in the police (63 per cent and 65 per cent respectively). The two territories record the highest confidence (80 per cent each), and the lowest levels of perceived corruption (the Northern Territory 13 per cent and the ACT 18 per cent).<sup>11</sup>

So overall, while only a quarter of respondents see the police as free of corruption, three-quarters maintain confidence in the police as a whole. Such findings indicate that, although people may now be primed to see police corruption as endemic, they do not consider police forces to be completely compromised. The idea that there is a reservoir of public trust in the police is confirmed by findings reported in chapter 8. There, Clive Bean reports that public confidence in police is exceeded only by confidence in the defence forces and is indeed

**Table 9.8 Perceptions of corruption in police by confidence in police, 2003, per cent**

Confidence in police	A lot of corruption in police		
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
A great deal of confidence	15	35	50
Quite a lot of confidence	21	51	28
Not very much confidence	51	42	7
No confidence at all	79	18	4
Can't choose	26	70	4
Total	30	46	24
(n = 4118)			

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

higher than the confidence enjoyed by universities or the ABC. Despite this, police forces should probably avoid complacency. When we examine the relationship between perceptions of corruption and confidence in the police, we find that these views are inversely related – as perceptions of corruption decline, confidence in police increase. Table 9.8 shows that while one in seven respondents with a great deal of confidence in the police believe that there is a lot of corruption in police ranks, this jumps to over half among those with ‘not very much’ confidence in the police.

### ARE AUSTRALIANS SATISFIED WITH SENTENCING?

The public confidence enjoyed by the police contrasts strongly with respondent views of the courts. The majority (almost three-quarters) of respondents indicate that they have ‘not very much’ (46 per cent) or ‘no’ (24 per cent) confidence in the courts and legal system. This is on a par with banks and financial institutions, and indeed much less than major Australian companies (see chapter 8). This finding points to a broader confidence problem for the courts and the legal system, which casts a shadow over their legitimacy.

We find the same low level of confidence in responses to statements about sentencing (see table 9.9). While the majority of respondents (63 per cent) agree that judges should reflect public opinion about crimes when sentencing criminals, seven out of ten believe that those who break the law should be given stiffer sentences, and almost half agree that the death penalty should be the punishment for murder. The public also

**Table 9.9 Attitudes to sentencing and punishment, 2003, per cent**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Can't choose
Judges should reflect public opinion when sentencing	31	32	15	18	5	2
People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences	31	39	21	6	2	2
The death penalty should be the punishment for murder	23	24	20	18	15	3
(n ≥ 4195)						

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

**Table 9.10 When big businesses break the law, they often go unpunished, 2003, per cent**

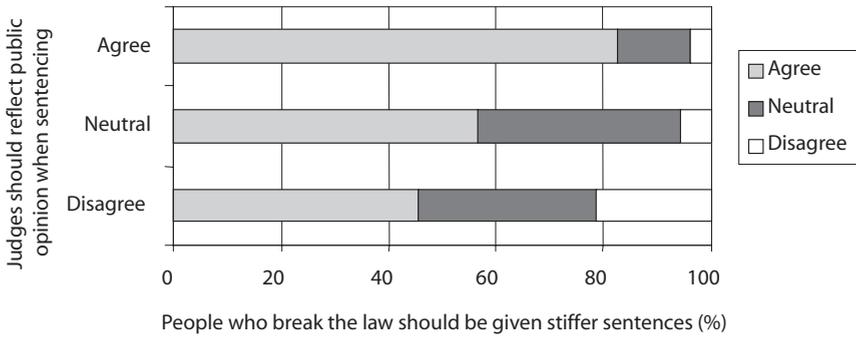
Strongly agree	40
Agree	41
Neither agree nor disagree	9
Disagree	5
Strongly disagree	3
Can't choose	2
(n = 4203)	

SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

questions treatment of institutional crimes: people are particularly suspicious of the leniency shown to illegal activities by big business, with a large majority believing that their crimes go unpunished (see table 9.10). This may be a by-product of falling confidence in major Australian companies reported in chapter 8.

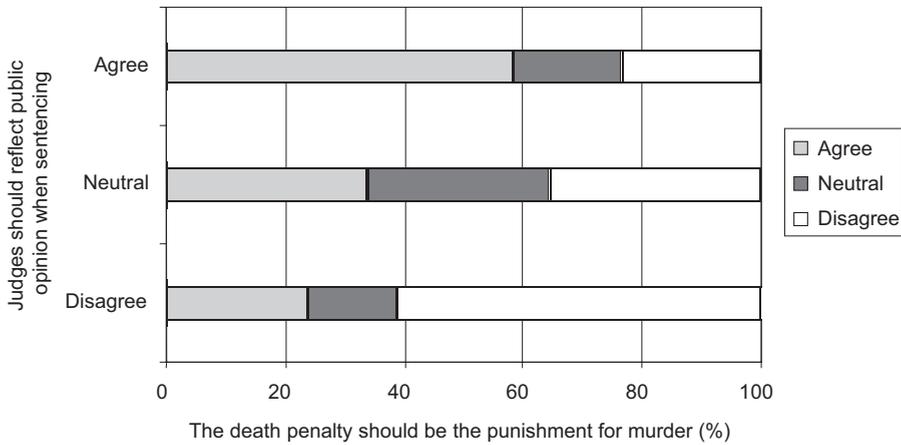
Those who agree that judges should reflect public opinion when sentencing are about twice as likely to agree with stiffer sentences (see figure 9.3), and that death should be the penalty for murder (figure 9.4). In other words, Australians who want sentencing to reflect public opinion tend to be the same people seeking harsher sentences and the death penalty. Not surprisingly, the relationship between stiffer sentences and the death penalty is even stronger: those seeking stiffer sentencing are five to six times more likely than those who do not seek stiffer sentencing to support the death penalty for murder.

**Figure 9.3 Agreement with stiffer sentences by agreement that judges should reflect public opinion in sentencing, 2003, per cent**



SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

**Figure 9.4 Agreement with death penalty for murder by agreement that judges should reflect public opinion in sentencing, 2003, per cent**



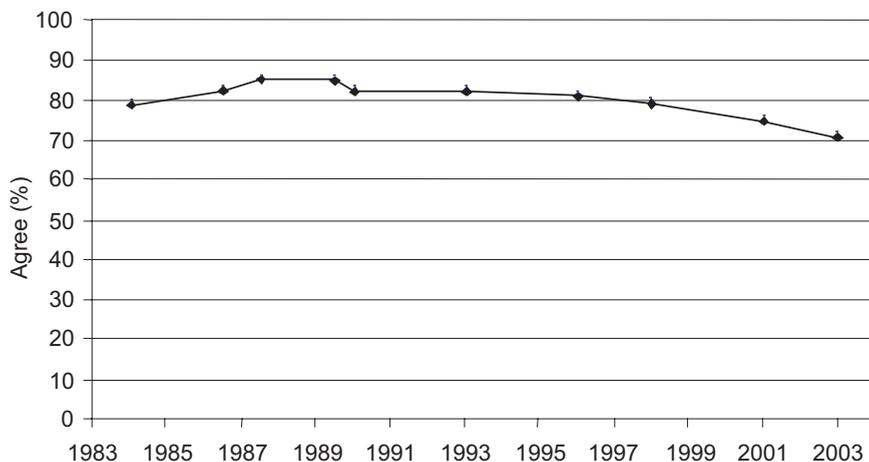
SOURCE The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

In sum, our findings on sentencing and the courts and legal system paint a dim picture. About three-quarters of AuSSA 2003 respondents have little or no confidence in the legal system’s performance and about the same proportion want stiffer sentences. And half of AuSSA 2003 respondents would reinstate the death penalty for murder, and more than half believe that sentencing should reflect public opinion.

However, neither the call for stiffer sentences nor the death penalty is new. Public opinion on stiffer sentencing and the death penalty has been sought on ten occasions over the past two decades. The trends

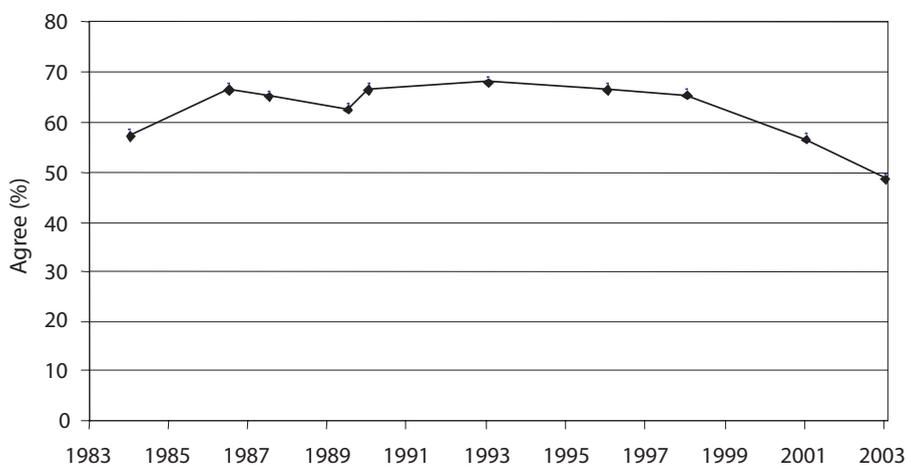
over time are plotted in figures 9.5 and 9.6, and reveal something interesting: the proportion of Australians who agree with stiffer sentences has declined from a peak in 1987. And agreement that the death penalty should be the punishment for murder actually peaked in 1993 – a time

**Figure 9.5** Agree that people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences, 1984–2003



**SOURCES** National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

**Figure 9.6** Agree that the death penalty should be the punishment for murder, 1984–2003



**SOURCES** National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1984, 1986–87, 1987–88, 1989–90); Australian Election Study (McAllister et al. 1990; Jones et al. 1993, 1996; Bean et al. 1999, 2002); The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003

when political and media attention to crime across English-speaking countries was extraordinary (Roberts et al. 2003). However, in line with findings from other countries, it appears that Australians hold slightly less punitive attitudes to criminal behaviour compared with the 1980s and 1990s (Roberts et al. 2003). Surprisingly, this change has taken place despite a continuing emphasis on law and order in the media and politics. Perhaps the public has reached 'saturation' point with constant media attention to crime and sentencing, and has become somewhat desensitised to the issue. Many people might also have become cynical about the inflammatory tone of much of the political debate on this topic.

What other factors can account for differences in opinion about sentencing? Responses to the three survey questions on stiffer sentencing, the death penalty and sentences reflecting public opinion are, in fact, so closely related that we can combine them in a scale that reflects the level of punitiveness or preference for punishment.<sup>12</sup> Using this scale, we can analyse the overall factors that shape attitudes. The results show that a tendency to favour punishment increases with age – older age groups are most likely to favour tougher punishment. There are also minor gender differences: women are more likely to favour tougher punishment. University-educated respondents are less supportive of a tough approach. Punitive attitudes among the elderly and women may point to greater personal and social vulnerability experienced by these groups. Fear of crime is also reflected in greater levels of routine precautions taken by the elderly to protect themselves (Pinkerton James 1992).

The link between vulnerability and punitiveness suggests that many community members think that increasing the sentences will reduce crime. However, research does not support this belief (Doob & Webster 2003). Indeed, for more punitive sentencing to deter criminals, a range of conditions must be met. The potential criminal must be aware of changes in punishment, believe that they are likely to be caught and that the new penalty will apply to them. The potential criminal must also consider the consequences of committing the offence, and calculate that an offence previously worth committing is no longer worth it (von Hirsch et al. 1999). So punitive sentences to reduce crime may hinder that goal, especially if this approach shifts resources from developing successful alternatives (Doob & Webster 2003).

## CONCLUSION

AuSSA 2003 findings suggest that Australians are too pessimistic about crime trends and lack confidence in the courts. This pessimism rests on unsupported beliefs that crime rates are rising. While we are gloomy about crime and the courts, Australians still invest real confidence in the police – despite widespread acknowledgment of police corruption. This somewhat contradictory view of law and order, however, makes sense if we keep in mind that commercial television remains Australia's main source of news and information about crime. Commercial television exploits crime as either sensational news or a source for fictional drama. Ultimately, the media blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction so that Australians are more familiar with scenes from police stations in the Bronx and Los Angeles than from their own cities.

Crime is continually 'news', so it is not surprising that perceptions of crime generally exaggerate its incidence. This phenomenon is not confined to Australia. Research on this problem points to the impact of media on community perceptions (see Roberts et al. 2003 for an overview). To further understand public opinion and perceptions on crime, we need to better understand how media treats crime. The challenge is to provide quality information, which is accessible to a broad public, so that common understandings of criminal justice are less captured by media imperatives.

### NOTES

- 1 Although most of these studies were conducted in North America and Europe, available Australian evidence finds similar trends. Weatherburn, Matka and Lind (1996) note, for instance, the increasing place of 'real concern' in public opinion polls from 1986, 1992 and 1994. An AGB McNair Poll conducted in 1994 found that of a list of concerns 'violence and crime' was the most commonly mentioned concern. 'Violence and crime' scored ahead of hospitals and health, unemployment, education and the environment.
- 2 See Beckett (1997) for a detailed treatment of this subject.
- 3 American views on crime and justice are documented in a number of distinct sources. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics contains readily accessible data on public opinion and crime. Probably the best source for ready access to a range of public opinion data is to be found in the sourcebook, *Criminal Justice Statistics*. Available online at <[http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/1995/toc\\_2.html](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/1995/toc_2.html)>.
- 4 A number of British sources (for example, see Hough & Roberts 1998) draw on items now regularly surveyed in the British Crime Survey. These can be found at the United Kingdom's Home Office Research and Development website. Available online at: <<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/>>. For European attitude studies, see Kury, Obergfell-Fuchs and Smartt (2002); and for international comparisons, see Mayhew and van Kesteren (2002).

- 5 See Indermaur (1987), who replicated earlier work undertaken in Canada by Tony Doob and Julian Roberts. Indermaur asked members of the public, who had responded to a general question about sentencing, about what type of criminal they were thinking of when answering that question. Seven out of ten respondents said they thought of a murderer, rapist or some other type of violent criminal.
- 6 The other commonly used source for assessing crime trends are population surveys that include self-reports of victimisation. It was not possible to use this data to establish crime trends for 2001–03 because the last national survey was conducted in 2002 (ABS 2003). However, information available in the 2002 survey indicates that crimes against the person and crimes against property were stable between 1998 and 2002 (ABS 2003).
- 7 Out of approximately 1 662 000 offences with victims reported by the ABS in Recorded Crime Australia for 2003 (ABS 2004), 87 per cent were property crimes and this figure excludes robbery because this is usually classified as violent crime rather than property crime.
- 8 Over the last 20 years, the homicide rate in Australia has been stable.
- 9 David Denmark (see chapter 13) details the important place of commercial television as a main source of news and information; less than 2 per cent of respondents rely on a source outside the media for news and information.
- 10 This research covers both the effect of *types* of media (radio versus newspapers, for instance) as well as *forms* of media (news versus entertainment) on perceptions. For a good overview of the literature, see Reiner (2002).
- 11 The number for AuSSA 2003 respondents from the two territories is small, so these results should be treated with caution.
- 12 The Cronbach's alpha for the scale (a measure of reliability) is .70, which is satisfactory for our purposes.

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