



Public Perceptions of Crime Trends in New South Wales and Western Australia

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State and Territory Governments come under considerable pressure to increase spending on law and order when their citizens believe crime is rising. Governments that spend more on law and order, however, inevitably have less to spend on other important public services, such as hospitals, schools and roads. The public interest is clearly not well served when public perceptions of trends in crime are mistaken. Yet overseas research has shown that public perceptions of trends in crime are often quite distorted. The present bulletin presents the results of a study into public perceptions of crime trends in New South Wales and Western Australia. The results confirm overseas research in showing widespread public misunderstanding of trends in crime.

INTRODUCTION

Public perceptions of crime play an important, sometimes even critical role in shaping law and order policy (Roberts, Stalans, Indermaur & Hough 2003). There would be little cause for concern in this if public perceptions were always well founded, but often they are not. Public opinion on crime is strongly shaped by what the media have

to say about it. Media coverage of crime is often selective and, on occasion, can be downright misleading.¹ Even when the media do not deliberately distort the facts on crime, bad news always tends to receive more coverage than good. Three murders in a day can reliably be counted on to generate a headline. Three weeks without a murder will normally pass without comment. Media

commentary on crime rarely does much to redeem this state of affairs. Indeed, some commentators reflexively reject any evidence that contradicts what they regard as commonsense. Last year, for example, one Sydney talk back radio host challenged police figures showing a decrease in crime on the grounds that they were inconsistent with what the public thinks has been happening to crime.²



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Although public perceptions of crime sometimes appear very distorted, surprisingly little research has been conducted in Australia to verify and measure the extent of this distortion. The little we know suggests that the distortion may be substantial. Weatherburn, Matka and Lind (1996) conducted a national survey of public perceptions of the risk of criminal victimisation in Australia. A representative sample of 2,164 respondents was asked (in 1995) to rate their chances of becoming victims of four different offences (break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and robbery). These perceived risks were then compared with the corresponding actual risks, as determined through the 1993 National Crime and Safety Survey (a representative sample survey of crime victimisation amongst more than 52,000 Australian residents). The results indicated that most Australians greatly over-estimate the risk of becoming victims of crime. They also indicated that the states whose residents were most concerned about a particular problem were not necessarily the states where that problem was most prevalent.

Weatherburn et al (1996) were concerned about whether variations in perceptions of crime across different States and Territories matched variations in actual crime risks. But the verisimilitude of public perceptions of trends in crime over time is no less important an issue. Public debate about law and order often centres on the question of whether crime has got 'out of control'. For all its vagueness, this is not a question that can easily be ignored. Government spending priorities are often strongly influenced by what the public sees, or the media says, is an emerging local, state or national priority. This would be a good thing were public opinion always well informed but often it is not. The more money governments spend on police and penalties and other instruments of crime control, the less

they have to spend on other valuable public services, such as hospitals, schools and roads. When governments increase their investment in law and order to deal with a non-existent problem (or one whose dimensions have been exaggerated), they inevitably have less to spend addressing genuine problems in other domains of policy. Fostering better public understanding of crime trends is clearly a matter that concerns the whole of government not just the police and the criminal justice system.

Overseas research suggests that public perceptions of trends in crime over time are sometimes extremely distorted. Mark Warr (1995), reflecting on the findings of American public opinion surveys from 1965 to 1993, found that each year there was near "unanimous" agreement that crime was increasing. These beliefs were, of course, independent of actual changes in the crime rate. The same picture emerges in Canada, where a survey conducted in 1999 found that 83% of respondents believed that crime was stable or increasing when, in fact it had been on the decline for seven years (Besserer and Trainor, 2000). Similarly, Mattinson and Mirrlees-Black (2000) reported that most of the respondents in the British Crime Survey (in 1996 and 1998) believed that the rate of crime had been increasing over the previous two-year period when, in fact, it had been decreasing. No similar research has ever been conducted in Australia despite its obvious relevance to policy in this country. This report presents the results of a first attempt to assess whether the pattern of public perception of crime trends found in Britain and the United States also exists in this country. As well as seeking to make a general assessment of the accuracy of public perceptions of crime trends, we were interested in identifying some of the characteristics of those most likely to hold false beliefs about trends in crime. Such information may be of assistance

in developing or targeting programs or services designed to improve public understanding of crime.

METHOD

Telephone interviews were conducted using random digit dialling over three weekends. The first was on the 28th-30th of November 2003 and this sweep involved only NSW. The second sweep involved surveys in both WA and NSW and was conducted on the 12th-14th of December 2003. The third survey on the 16th-18th of January 2004 only involved WA. The survey was carried out as part of a regular AC Neilsen omnibus survey of 1,400 people aged eighteen years and over conducted once a fortnight across Australia. The NSW component of the survey produced a useable sample of 857 interviews. The WA component of the survey produced a useable sample of 252 interviews. The response rates to the survey for NSW and WA were 24 and 32 per cent, respectively. The samples in both states reflected the age and gender distribution of the relevant state.

Given the similarity between the sample and general population age proportions, unweighted prevalence estimates are used throughout this bulletin.

Respondents were asked about trends over the last two years in six common offences: home break-in, motor vehicle theft, robbery with a firearm, sexual assault, murder and shoplifting.

The exact wording of questions in the survey was as follows, with the state mentioned corresponding to the actual state in which the survey was conducted:

"I want to ask you a few questions about crime in NSW (WA). The questions are all about **crime trends in NSW (WA) over the last two years**. During this period, **in your opinion (emphasis in original)**:

Q1a Have home break-ins become more common, less

common or stayed about the same?

- Q1b Have motor vehicle thefts become more common, less common or stayed about the same?
- Q1c Have robberies with a firearm become more common, less common or stayed about the same?
- Q1d Have sexual assaults become more common, less common or stayed about the same?
- Q1e Have murders become more common, less common or stayed about the same?
- Q1f Has shoplifting become more common, less common or stayed about the same?"

The listed response options for these questions were 'more common', 'less common' and 'stayed about the same'. However, if respondents said they did not know which response was correct, 'don't know' was recorded as their response. The order, in which each of the questions Q1a to Q1f were asked, was rotated across respondents.

To interpret the results of the survey, it is necessary to consider the actual trends in crime for each of the offences about which respondents were asked. Two sets of trends are relevant. The first set comprises those about which people can readily obtain information. The second set comprises those that prevailed in the two years immediately prior to the interview, and thus provide the technically correct answer.

The second column of Table 1, shows the trends³ in recorded crime for each of the offences over the 24 months to December 2002 (i.e. about 11 months prior to the survey). These trends were published in the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2002 annual recorded crime statistics report, which was released in March 2003 and was available on-line from that month. The third column of Table 1 shows the

Table 1: Trends in crime in New South Wales

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Jan 2001 – Dec 2002</i>	<i>Oct 2001 – Sep 2003</i>
Home break-ins	Down 12.9 per cent	Down 11.6 per cent
Car theft	Down 22.2 per cent	Down 20.9 per cent
Murder	Stable	Stable
Sexual assault	Stable	Stable
Robbery with a firearm	Stable	Stable
Shoplifting	Up 7.5 per cent	Up 6.1 per cent

Table 2: Trends in crime in Western Australia

<i>Offence</i>	<i>Jan 2001 – Dec 2002</i>	<i>Oct 2001 – Sep 2003</i>
Home break-ins	Stable	Stable
Car theft	Stable	Down 6 per cent
Murder	Stable	Stable
Sexual assault	Stable	Stable
Robbery with a firearm	Stable	Stable
Shoplifting	Up 6.4 per cent	Stable

trends⁴ for the 24-month period up to September 2003 (i.e. about two months before the start of surveying).

It is evident that the trends in the relevant offence categories up to September 2003 are very similar to those over the 24-month period up to December 2002, which were announced in March 2003.

For the sake of a fair comparison with NSW, and to allow for 'reasonable expectations' of public judgment, we also considered two sets of trends in Western Australia. The first series comprises the 24 months between January 2001 and December 2002. The second series comprises the 24 months between October 2001 and September 2003. The results for both periods are shown in Table 2.

It is clear from an examination of these trends that most of the six offences have been stable or falling over both periods examined. The only exception is shoplifting, which increased between

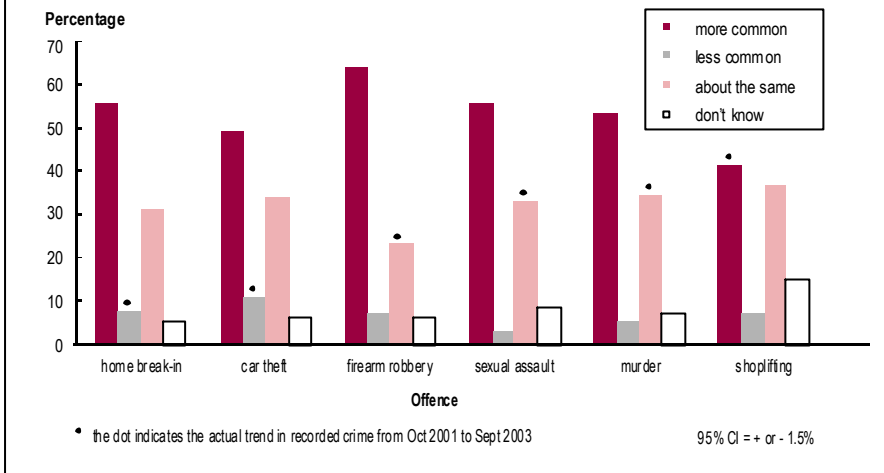
January 2001 and December 2002 but which was stable over the period October 2001 and September 2003.

RESULTS

NSW RESPONDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME TRENDS

Figure 1 shows the overall pattern of responses within the NSW sample to the questions about the six offences that were the subject of the survey. The correct response has been identified with a dot above the relevant bar. The first point to note about Figure 1 is that a majority of respondents believe that every category of crime has been rising over the last two years. Less than 10 percent perceive that home break-ins are falling and only slightly more than 10 per cent perceive that car thefts are falling. Moreover, although robbery with a firearm, sexual assault and

Figure 1: NSW public perceptions of crime trends



murder have shown no downward or upward trend in NSW over the last two years, only about 23 per cent of respondents thought that robbery with a firearm had been stable and only about 33 per cent thought that sexual assault had been stable. The percentage that thought murder had been stable was slightly higher than that for sexual assault – at 34 per cent. But this result is in some ways more troubling, since homicide has been stable in NSW for more than a decade. Because of their proclivity to say crime is rising, the trend about which people were most likely to be correct was shoplifting. Ironically, this was the offence *least* likely to be identified by respondents as becoming more common.

Figure 2: Perceived trend in home break-ins by age (NSW)

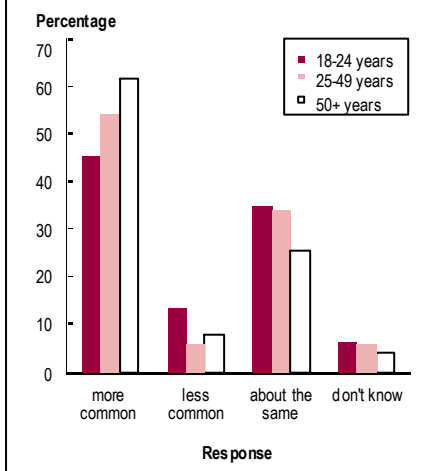
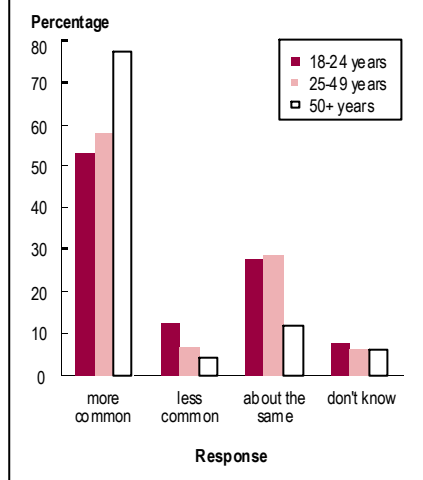


Figure 4: Perceived trend in robbery with a firearm by age (NSW)



The pattern of response to the questions about crime varied for different demographic and social groups within the NSW sample. The figures that follow only show comparisons between groups that are statistically significant.⁵ Figures 2-5 show the relationship between age of respondents and their response to questions about trends in home break-ins, murder, robbery with a firearm and shoplifting. It is evident that older respondents (particularly those aged 50 and over) are more likely than younger respondents to hold the view that home break-ins, murder, robbery with a firearm and shoplifting are becoming more common.

Figure 3: Perceived trend in murder by age (NSW)

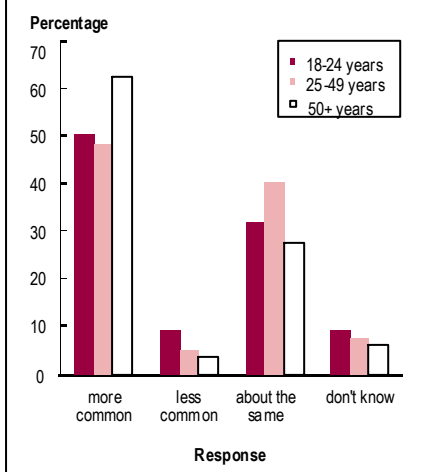
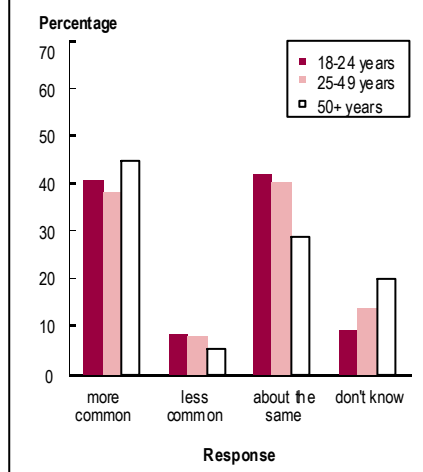


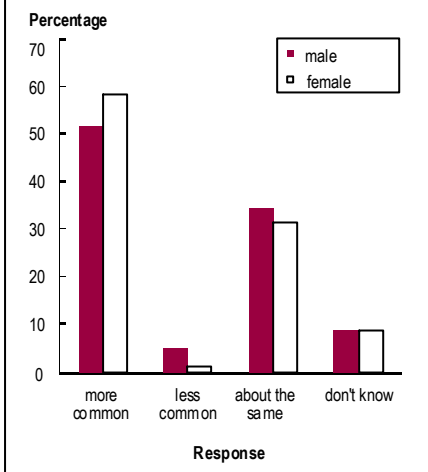
Figure 5: Perceived trend in shoplifting by age (NSW)



Although older respondents were much more likely to say they thought that the offences had become more common, there were no major differences between younger and older respondents in the percentage who thought each of the offences were becoming less common. Instead, older respondents were somewhat less likely to say that the offences had remained about the same, and in the case of shoplifting, somewhat less likely to say they did not know.

Figures 6, 7 and 8 show, respectively, the relationship between the gender of the respondent and their response to

Figure 6: Perceived trend in sexual assault by gender (NSW)



questions about sexual assault, murder and shoplifting.

It is evident in each case that women are more likely than men to believe that the offences in question were becoming more common.

The pattern of response to the question of whether home break-ins were becoming more common varied according to whether the respondent lived in Sydney or outside Sydney. Figure 9 shows that those outside of Sydney were significantly more likely to say that home break-ins were becoming more common than those who live in Sydney. They were correspondingly less likely to say that home break-ins were becoming less common or that this offence had remained about the same.

The pattern of response to the question about car theft also varied according to the region in which respondents lived. Figure 10 shows that people living outside of Sydney were more likely than those living in Sydney to say they thought car theft was becoming more common. They were less likely to say that it was becoming less common or that it had stayed about the same.

Figure 11 shows the pattern of response to the question about robbery with a firearm. Here the pattern is reversed, with Sydney residents being more likely to say that robbery with a firearm is becoming more common than people living outside Sydney. Note, however, that there was little difference in the proportions of Sydney and non-Sydney respondents saying that robberies with a firearm had become less common or the proportions saying that they did not know. Instead, Sydney residents were less likely to say that robberies with a firearm had stayed about the same.

Occupational status of the respondent was also related to respondents' perceptions of crime. Figures 12 and 13 show that respondents in blue-collar occupations were more likely to believe that motor vehicle theft and murder

Figure 9: Perceived trend in home break-ins by region (NSW)

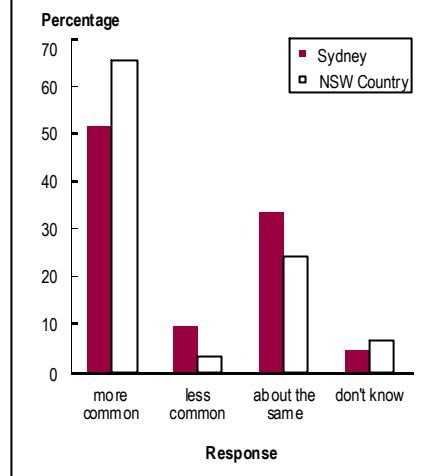


Figure 7: Perceived trend in murder by gender (NSW)

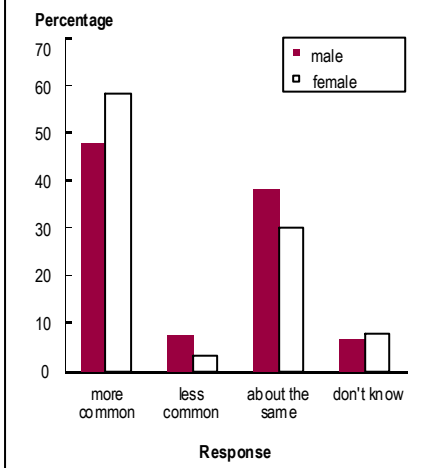


Figure 10: Perceived trend in car theft by region (NSW)

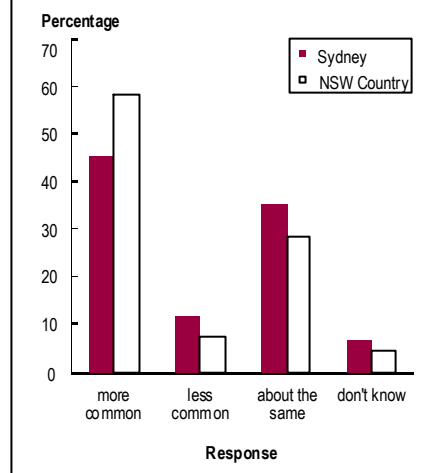


Figure 8: Perceived trend in shoplifting by gender (NSW)

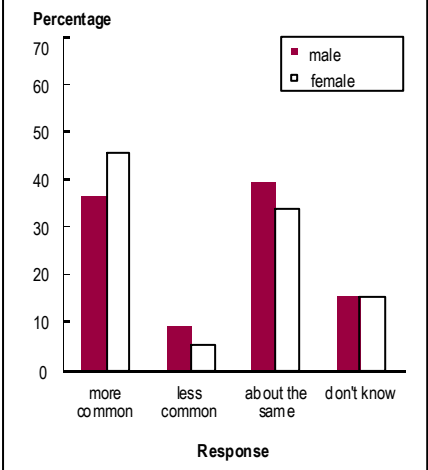


Figure 11: Perceived trend in robbery with a firearm by region (NSW)

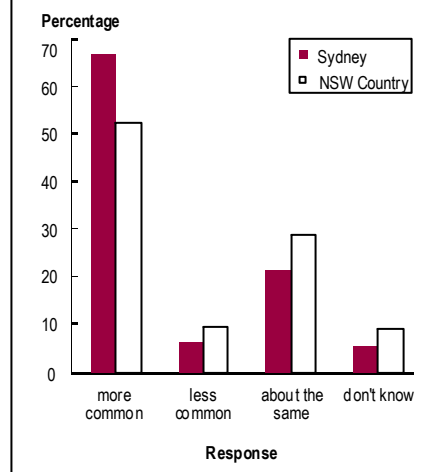
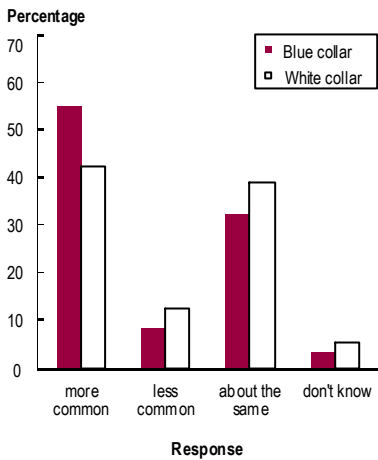


Figure 12: Perceived trend in car theft by occupation status (NSW)



had become more common over the last two years.

WA RESPONDENT PERCEPTIONS OF CRIME TRENDS

Figure 14 shows the pattern of responses in Western Australia to the six offences that were subject of the survey. Once again, a dot has been used to indicate the correct response.

Like their counterparts in New South Wales, respondents from West Australia also have a proclivity to see crime as increasing. This tendency appears to be particularly strong for home break-ins.

The results in terms of demographic subgroups generally mirrored those in NSW but, due to the small WA sample size, these differences failed to reach statistical significance. When those who believed that crime was becoming less prevalent were grouped together with those who thought it was 'about the same', however, there were some significant differences by age and gender. Figure 15 shows that, in Western Australia as in NSW, respondents aged 50 and over were more likely to say they thought that murder had become more prevalent over the last two years than those aged under 50.

Figure 15: Perceived trend in murder by age (WA)

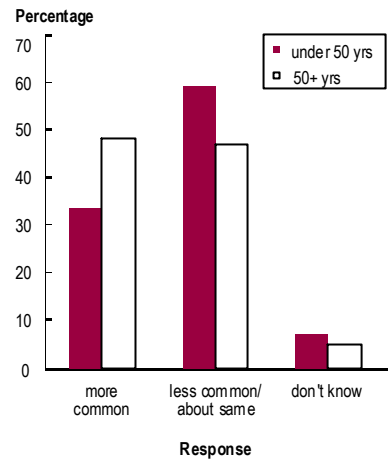


Figure 13: Perceived trend in murder by occupation status (NSW)

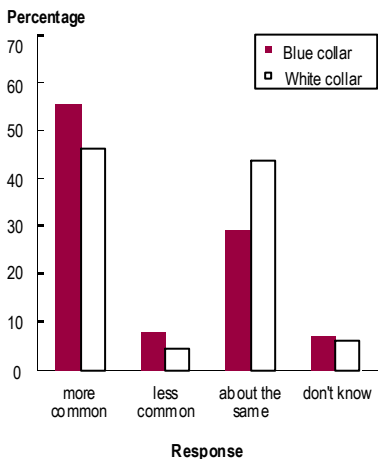


Figure 16: Perceived trend in shoplifting by age (WA)

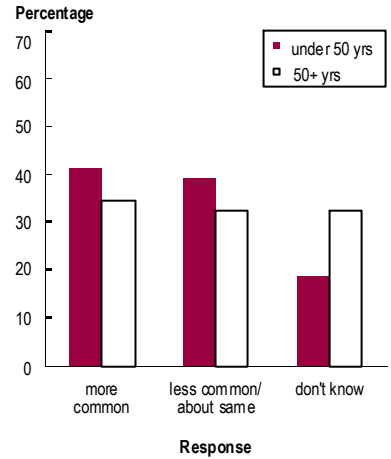
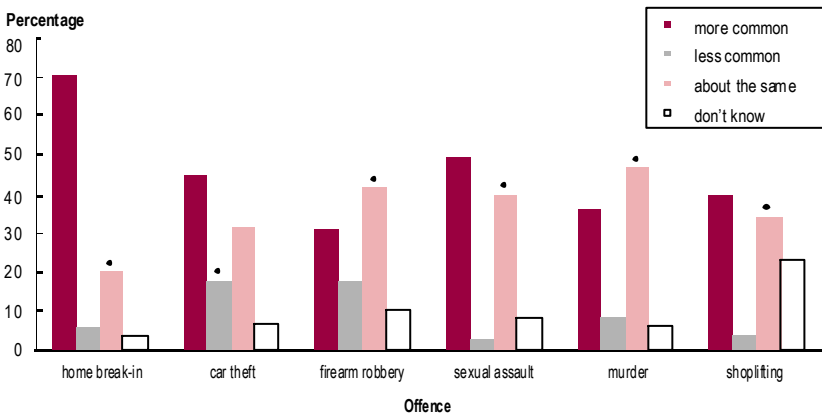
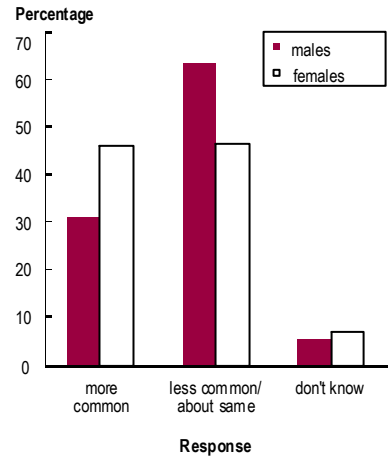


Figure 14: WA public perceptions of crime trends



• the dot indicates the actual trend in recorded crime from Oct 2001 to Sept 2003

Figure 17: Perceived trend in murder by gender (WA)



The opposite, however, was true of shoplifting. As can be seen from Figure 16, West Australian respondents aged 50 and over were *less likely* to say they thought this offence had become more prevalent than those under the age of 50. This is the opposite effect to that found for New South Wales (see Figure 5).

The only other significant variation in crime trend perceptions in Western Australia concerned murder. As in New South Wales, women in Western Australia were more likely than men to say that murder had become more common (see Figure 17).

NSW and WA perceptions of crime compared

Table 3 compares the accuracy of NSW and WA respondents' perceptions of trends in crime.

In neither State was there any offence category in which a majority of respondents correctly identified the trend. Overall, however, a higher proportion of WA respondents than NSW respondents correctly judged the trend in each category of crime. Surprisingly, respondents from both States fared poorest in their judgments of the most commonly occurring categories of crime, namely home break-ins and motor vehicle theft. In NSW, more than 90 per cent of respondents were incorrect in their judgment about the trend in home break-in. In Western Australia, more than 80 per cent were incorrect in their

judgment about the trend in car theft. The latter finding is particularly surprising in view of the fact that Western Australia has been singularly successful in reducing the prevalence of motor vehicle theft over the last five years.

DISCUSSION

The present study confirms overseas research in showing that most people believe crime is becoming more common, regardless of the true state of affairs. The extent of this tendency varies across different social groups, with women and older people being more likely to believe that crime is becoming more common than men or younger people. In NSW, a tendency to believe that crime is becoming more common was also evident for country dwellers and for blue-collar workers. There were some exceptions to these generalisations. Robbery with a firearm was more likely to be seen by Sydney residents as having become more common than by those living outside of Sydney. Shoplifting in WA, on the other hand, was more likely to be seen by younger people as becoming more common than by older people.

Although the present study was confined to New South Wales and Western Australia, the level of public misapprehension about crime is unlikely to differ markedly in other Australian states and territories. The causes of this

misapprehension are impossible to determine on the basis of the evidence gathered in this study, but it is likely that at least one of the factors contributing to the problem is a tendency on the part of the media to give an exaggerated or distorted picture of the direction, character and prevalence of crime. This tendency is not always deliberate. It is not necessary to say crime is becoming more common in order to create the impression that it is. All that is required is a regular failure to put spates of offending or particular crime problems into perspective by providing objective information on whether the problem in question has actually become more prevalent. If this process is repeated regularly enough (as it is) the conclusion that crime is inexorably rising becomes difficult to resist, especially for those (e.g. women and older people) who already feel vulnerable to crime and who, for this reason, are likely to exaggerate the threat that it poses.

The fact that many members of the Australian public hold false views about trends in crime ought to be a matter of serious concern to Australian governments. Recent research in Britain has shown that people who mistakenly think crime has risen generally have less confidence in the criminal justice system than those who do not hold this view, even after controls have been introduced for other factors that might influence public confidence in criminal justice. Loss of public confidence in the criminal justice system is obviously something all governments should seek to avoid, the more so where loss of confidence has been engendered not by any failing on the part of the criminal justice system or by those who work within it, but by a mistaken perception of trends in crime. Those who wish to maintain or foster public confidence in the criminal justice system, therefore, would be well advised to seek ways of fostering a broader and more accurate public understanding of trends in crime.

Table 3: Crime trend perceptions (NSW and WA compared)

Offence	NSW trend*	% correct (NSW)	WA trend*	% correct (WA)
Home break-ins	Down	8	Stable	20
Car theft	Down	11	Down	18
Murder	Stable	34	Stable	46
Sexual assault	Stable	33	Stable	40
Robbery w/a firearm	Stable	23	Stable	41
Shoplifting	Up	41	Stable	34

* from Oct 2001 to Sept 2003.

It is hard to see any easy means by which to reduce the level of public ignorance about trends in crime without providing more and better information about crime. Successive governments in NSW and WA (and in some other States) have shown an acute awareness of this fact. Both NSW and WA, for example, have placed responsibility for disseminating statistical data on crime in the hands of an independent agency. In New South Wales, the agency in question is the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). In Western Australia it is the Crime Research Center at the University of Western Australia (CRC). Both BOCSAR and the CRC produce comprehensive annual reports on crime and criminal justice. Both also play an active role in trying to inform public debate about crime, through their respective research programs and through active participation in media debate about law and order issues. Despite their efforts, however, neither BOCSAR nor the CRC could claim to have been particularly successful in ensuring that most people in New South Wales or Western Australia have a fair understanding of what is happening to the major categories of crime.

Releasing an annual report on crime, no matter how detailed and comprehensive, may not be enough to combat the torrent of uninformed speculation about crime that permeates the daily media. If the media are to be asked to keep particular crime problems in perspective, it could be argued that they, and the general public, need to be able to readily access information on the nature of those problems as, and when, they arise. On reflection, government crime information services might be

better geared toward providing up-to-date and pertinent information about trends in all major categories of crime, in each area of the State, at regular points throughout the year. The effort to promote a better understanding of crime might be still further assisted if governments took active steps to communicate information about crime directly to those in the community most prone to holding misapprehensions about it. Of course, if such efforts were to have any credibility, they would have to provide the public with access to information highlighting emerging problems as well as information that reassures people about crime. But then, that is the very essence of objective information about crime.

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NOTES

- 1 A few years ago, for example, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research pointed out when releasing the annual crime statistics that a sudden jump in stealing offences had resulted from a change in the way NSW police record the crime of stealing from the person. Sections of the media simply ignored the advice and reported an increase in stealing from the person.
- 2 Alan Jones 2GB, 17 November, 2003 8:08am.
- 3 These results are based on the following procedure. For each offence category except murder, a statistical test (Kendall's Tau) for trend was applied to the monthly numbers of recorded criminal incidents over the 24-month period to December 2002. In the case of murder the test was applied to the numbers of victims. Where a statistically significant trend was found, the extent of the trend is indicated by the percentage change between the total number of recorded incidents for the first 12 months of the 24-month period and the total number of recorded incidents in the second 12 months of the 24-month period.
- 4 These trends have been assessed in the same way as those up to December 2002, however the relevant 24-month period stretches from October 2001 to September 2003.
- 5 Chi-square tests were used to assess whether the following two-way classifications were significant. The alpha level was set at 0.05 but most comparisons were significant at 0.01 or lower.