

V Public opinion of the police

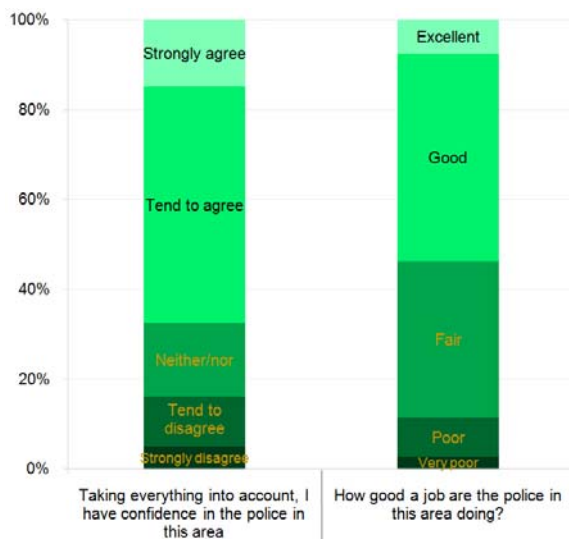
Interpreting measures of confidence

Depending on the question, levels of confidence in the police in 2009 as measured by the British Crime Survey (BCS)ⁱ were either 56% or 69%. The former represents the proportion of respondents saying that the police were doing a ‘good’ or an ‘excellent’ job in their area; the latter denotes those who ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘tended to agree’ with the phrase *Taking everything into account, I have confidence in the police in my area*. It is difficult to take much meaning from these figures without asking some questions first.

Is there a middle ground?

Results from surveys of confidence and trust in the police are sensitive to the phrasing of the question and the choice of responses. Distrust of the police is quite uncommon, as are expressions of outright approval. The chart on the right shows the responses to the two different questions relating to confidence asked in the BCS: the most popular choices were those that expressed limited approval or ambivalence. Respondents were particularly drawn to the non-committal ‘tend to agree’ option. This suggests that confidence in the police is not typically something individuals either ‘have’ or ‘do not have’; rather, it is a

Distribution of answers to questions about confidence in the police, 2009/10

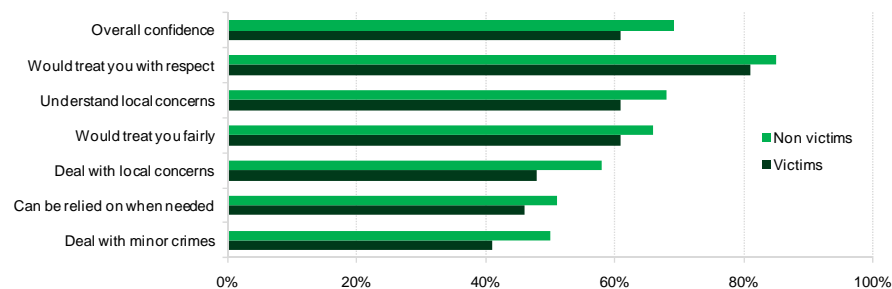


question of degree, with the majority of people inhabiting the middle ground.

Confidence in what?

The BCS attempts to capture specific aspects of confidence: for instance, respondents are asked if they think the police would treat them with respect, and whether they understand local concerns. The chart below shows the percentage of respondents tending to agree or strongly agreeing with various statements about the police according to whether they were a victim of crime in the past 12 months or not. Again, the largest response category among both these groups for all questions was ‘tend to agree’, although victims of crime are significantly less likely to express confidence in the police than non-victims.

Percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the police, by whether or not a victim of crime in the past 12 months, 2009/10



Confidence among whom?

The difference between victims and non-victims illustrated above was shown more formally in a statistical analysis of the 2005/06 BCS responses.ⁱⁱ This found that confidence in the local police is linked to particular characteristics, with certain groups being more likely to say the police are doing a good or an excellent job. The analysis showed that, other things being equal, people’s perceptions, experiences and attitudes were important in determining their confidence in the police;

socioeconomic factors (e.g. income, social class etc.), by contrast, were not found to have a significant bearing.

The table below lists the factors that were found to have a statistically significant influence on individuals' confidence in the police, other things being equal, and the magnitude of that effect. For instance, those who had not witnessed a crime in the previous 12 months were 1.22 times (i.e. 22%) more likely to express confidence in the police than those who had.ⁱⁱⁱ

Factors that are significant in determining levels of confidence in the police				
Other things held constant,			times more likely to express confidence in the police than	
	those who don't read any newspapers are	are	1.18	Tabloid newspaper readers
" "	those who read broadsheets	" "	1.37	Tabloid newspaper readers
" "	those who think there is less crime than 2 years' ago	" "	1.54	Those who think there is more (perceived) crime than 2 years' ago
" "	those who think there is the same amount of crime as 2 years' ago	" "	1.23	Those who think there is more (perceived) crime than 2 years' ago
" "	those who think there is some antisocial behaviour in their area	" "	1.45	Those who perceive high levels of anti-social behaviour
" "	those who think there is no antisocial behaviour in their area	" "	2.00	Those who perceive high levels of anti-social behaviour
" "	those who have not witnessed a crime in the previous 12 months	" "	1.22	Those who have witnessed a crime
" "	home owners	" "	1.28	Private renters
" "	those who feel safe alone after dark	" "	1.15	Those who feel unsafe alone after dark
" "	males	" "	1.14	Females
" "	those aged 16-24	" "	1.41	Those aged 45+

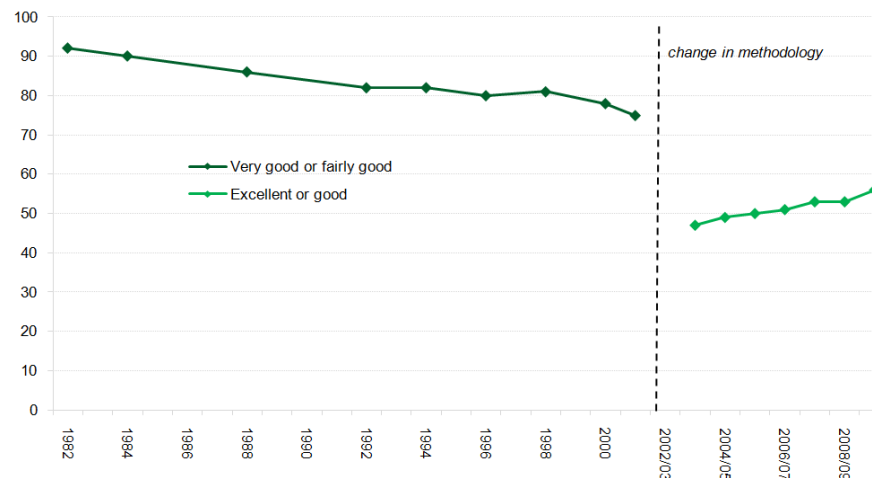
Source: Myhill and Beak (2006), p.28 (adapted)

Trends over time

The BCS has measured confidence in the police since the survey began in 1982, although changes to the methodology mean results are not fully comparable over time. The percentage of individuals saying the police were doing a very good or fairly good job from a four-point scale (very

good; fairly good; poor; very poor) declined gradually from 92% in 1982 to 75% in 2001/02. The percentage saying that the police are doing a 'good' or 'excellent' job from the five-point scale described earlier has risen from 47% in 2003/04 to 56% in 2009/10^{iv} (see chart). The sharp jump following the change in methodology again illustrates the importance of the choice of options available to respondents.

Percentage of respondents saying police are doing a good job, 1982-2009/10



Using confidence to measure performance of individual police forces

The BCS measure of confidence derived from the question *How good a job are the police in this area doing?* has in the past fed into police force performance management frameworks. A new set of questions was included in the BCS from October 2007 relating to levels of confidence in the police working with local agencies to tackle anti-social behaviour and crime. These were developed to assess fulfilment of the 'Making Communities Safer' Public Service Agreement (PSA 23). In 2009/10, 56% of respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree that the police were dealing with anti-social behaviour and crime issues in the local area, the same percentage as thought the police were doing a good or an excellent

job. Results for individual police forces are shown in the table below. These measures will no longer play a role in assessing police force performance.

Police force area	Overall rating ^a		Police deal with local concerns ^b	
	% approval	compared with England and Wales	% agreement	compared with England and Wales
Cleveland	55		54	LOWER
Durham	55		56	
Northumbria	57		58	
Cheshire	55	HIGHER	51	LOWER
Cumbria	60	HIGHER	63	HIGHER
Greater Manchester	50	LOWER	51	LOWER
Lancashire	57		61	HIGHER
Merseyside	56		56	
Humberside	47	LOWER	47	LOWER
North Yorkshire	60		58	
South Yorkshire	56		51	LOWER
West Yorkshire	57		57	
Derbyshire	51	LOWER	53	
Leicestershire	57		58	
Lincolnshire	48	LOWER	52	LOWER
Northamptonshire	54	LOWER	52	
Nottinghamshire	46	LOWER	46	
Staffordshire	52		51	LOWER
Warwickshire	53		52	
West Mercia	56		58	
West Midlands	56		57	
Bedfordshire	58		57	
Cambridgeshire	52	LOWER	55	HIGHER
Essex	56		60	HIGHER
Hertfordshire	62	HIGHER	59	
Norfolk	54		57	
Suffolk	57		59	
Metropolitan/City of London	59	HIGHER	57	
Hampshire	59		58	
Kent	52	LOWER	52	
Surrey	64	HIGHER	59	
Sussex	59		53	
Thames Valley	60		54	
Avon and Somerset	57		56	
Devon and Cornwall	63	HIGHER	58	
Dorset	62	HIGHER	60	HIGHER
Gloucestershire	59		59	
Wiltshire	58		59	HIGHER
Dyfed-Powys	58		61	HIGHER
Gwent	45	LOWER	47	LOWER
North Wales	53		57	
South Wales	52		50	LOWER
ENGLAND AND WALES	56		56	HIGHER

^a based on response to question *Taking ev'rything into account, how good a job do you think the police in this area are doing?*; approval rating based on percentage responding 'good' or 'excellent' from a five-point scale

^b based on agreement ('strongly agree' or 'tend to agree') with statement *the police and local council are dealing with the anti-social behaviour and crime issues that matter in the area*

Source: Home Office *Crime in England and Wales 2009/10*, Table 7.20

Other surveys of confidence in the police

Ad hoc surveys of confidence in the police have also been conducted by polling organisations. MORI conducted seven polls between 1983 and 2002, where confidence in the police ranged between 59% and 63%.^v Six times between 1987 and 2000, the British Social Attitudes survey asked respondents how much they trusted police not to bend the rules to secure a conviction. 59% of respondents said they would trust them 'almost all' or 'most' of the time in 2000, compared with 51% in 1987.^{vi}

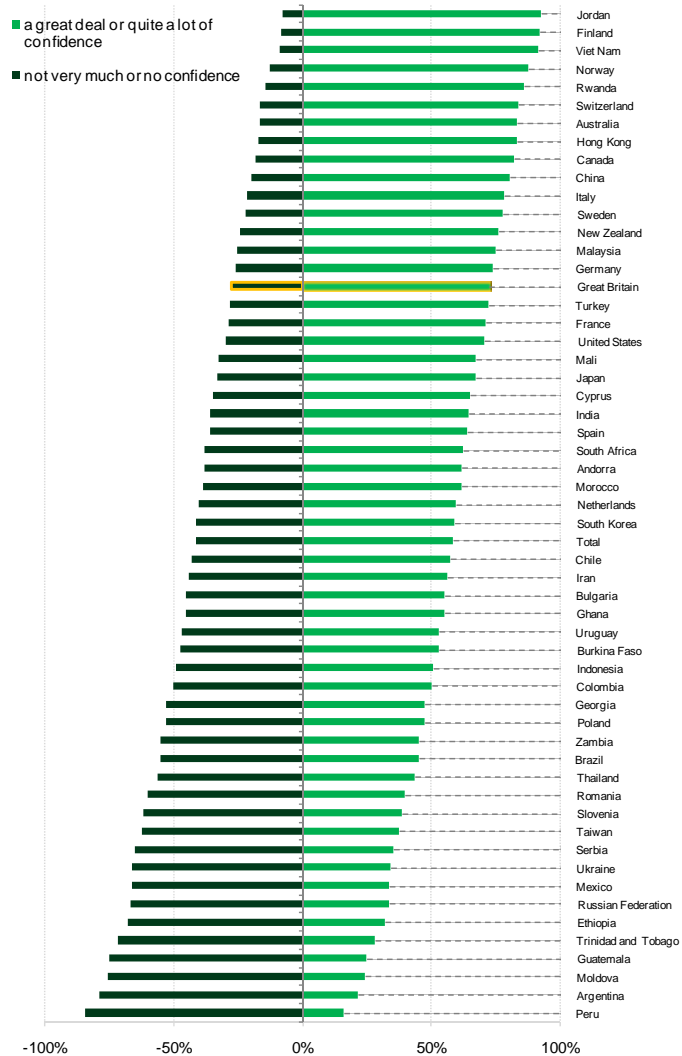
Polling data from MORI also suggest that there is little difference between the level of trust the public afford the police as an institution and their trust in individual police officers. This contrasts with other areas (e.g. parliament and the media) where the institution receives a higher trust rating than the individuals that comprise it.^{vii}

International comparisons

The World Values Survey contains questions on confidence in public institutions. In the fifth survey, conducted during 2005-08, respondents in 56 countries (between 900 and 3,000 in each) were asked about their confidence in the police. Great Britain had the 16th highest levels of confidence (72%), just below Germany and just above Turkey; of the 19 European countries surveyed, it placed 7th. Data for all countries is summarised in the following chart.

It is worth noting that, as in the BCS, levels of qualified support ('quite a lot of confidence') were very high in other developed countries, whilst more explicit backing ('a great deal of confidence') tended to be more prevalent in developing nations.^{viii}

International comparisons of public confidence in the police, 2005-08



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ⁱ The British Crime Survey questions around 47,000 16-59 year olds on their experiences of crime victimisation, and perceptions of crime-related issues. Despite the name, it covers England and Wales only. More information can be found in the [relevant section of the Home Office website](#).

ⁱⁱ Myhill and Beak (2008) *Public Confidence in the Police*.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a full list of variables used in the model, see [p.27 ibid](#)

^{iv} Home Office (2003) *Crime in England and Wales 2001/02: Supplementary Volume*; Home Office *Crime in England and Wales* (various edns.)

^v In this case, 'trust' was assessed by the response to the question *Would you tell me whether you generally trust the police to tell the truth or not? (Yes/No/Don't know)*

^{vi} British Social Attitudes Survey (various edns.), accessed via www.britsocat.com

^{vii} See MORI (2003, p.11) *Exploring Trust in Public Institutions: report for the Audit Commission*

^{viii} World Values Survey Fifth Edition (2010), accessed via [online data analysis tool](#)