

Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey

RESEARCH UPDATE

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Police and the youth vote

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The continuing uncertainties among political leaders about the durability of Northern Ireland's devolved political institutions turn primarily on the failure to resolve three wearily familiar, but nonetheless vital, issues: demilitarisation, decommissioning and police reform. Results from the 1999, 2000 and 2001 *Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys* indicate clearly that in relation to police reform those uncertainties are shared widely within both major communities.

Significant change has occurred on the policing front since the publication of the Patten Report's 175 recommendations for reform in September 1999. Amid unionist campaigns to 'Save the RUC' and nationalist claims that Patten, and the British government's interpretation of the Report, did not go far enough, the Policing Bill became law in November 2000. By August 2001, the SDLP had been persuaded to join the Northern Ireland Policing Board, and in November 2001 the Policing Board had its inaugural meeting. The same month saw the police force change its name to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and by April 2002 the first new police recruits had graduated.

A backdrop of political contention accompanied all of the changes, and this overlay already embedded opinions on policing. A residual antipathy towards policing was always likely to persist within the Catholic community. Against this context, the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys* have sought to monitor public attitudes towards policing.

Asked whether they *would encourage a close relative to join the police*, it is clear that between a quarter and a third of Catholics have been unmoved by police reform. In 1999 33% of Catholics would discourage a close relative from a career in policing, and despite a fall in this figure for 2000 (24%) it rose again for 2001 (29%). The figures for those who would encourage a close relative to join the police also show volatility, with a slight upward trend (from 28% to 32%) if the 1999-2001 period is taken as a whole. What is clear though is that there has been no revolution in Catholic opinion, and predictions that police reform will take decades rather than years are likely to be borne out.

But as Table 1 shows, Catholic opinion is fluid, with significant numbers in the non-committal 'neither/it depends' category and possibly susceptible to positive reaction in the light of police reform.

Table 1: Would you encourage a close relative to join the police, discourage them from joining, or neither – Catholic respondents

	%		
	Catholic		
	1999	2000	2001
Encourage	28	23	32
Discourage	33	24	29
Neither/it depends	36	46	35
Don't know	3	7	5

The survey period shows an overall decline in the proportion of Protestants prepared to encourage a close relative to join the police. In 1999 more than half (55%) of Protestant respondents were prepared to do so, whereas in the following year, in the wake of the Police Act, it stood at 44%. 2001 recorded a slight recovery to 47%. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Would you encourage a close relative to join the police, discourage them from joining, or neither – Protestant respondents

	%		
	Protestant		
	1999	2000	2001
Encourage	55	44	47
Discourage	12	14	19
Neither/it depends	29	37	29
Don't know	4	6	5

Indeed, the proportion of Protestants prepared to discourage a close relative from joining the police has edged up over the 1999-2001 period to almost a fifth (19%). A substantial proportion of Protestants (29% in 2001) adopt a cautious 'wait and see' attitude perhaps reflecting the upheavals associated with policing.

Overall, the relative caution evident among Catholics and Protestants may give grounds for optimism. In both communities, the proportion who register as 'neither/it depends' is larger than those who would discourage a close relative from joining the police, suggesting that many people are

willing to review the evidence of police reform before reaching a conclusion. For all three years of the survey, Catholics have been more likely than Protestants to occupy the 'neither/it depends' category.

It is worth noting that Northern Ireland's population was heavily 'lobbied' during the survey fieldwork periods, with political leaders imploring them to support or reject police reform. For example, in November 2000 (in the middle of that year's survey fieldwork) Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern noted that it was 'too early' for nationalists to consider joining the new police force.

What must be particularly worrying for the recruitment process is that the willingness among Protestants to encourage a close relative to join the police service has fallen sharply among 18-29 year olds – the obvious target groups for recruiters. (See Table 3.) The proportion of Protestants in this age cohort who would encourage a close relative to join the police shows a substantial decline over the 1999-2000 period, and an increase in the 2000-2001 period. However, overall there has been a decline from 51% in 1999 to 42% in 2001.

Older Protestants (aged 46 years and over) are much more likely to encourage a close relative to become a police officer than those in the younger age groupings, perhaps reflecting the esteem that many older Protestants held for policing as a traditional career route.

The proportion of Protestants who would discourage a close relative from joining the police remained fairly constant among all age groups in 1999 and 2000, but rose in 2001, especially among the younger cohorts.

So among many Protestant siblings and parents there is now less of a disposition to support a family member's aspiration to join the new police service than in 1999.

Table 3: Would you encourage a close relative to join the police, discourage them from joining, or neither? – Protestant respondents

1999	%		
	Protestant		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	51	48	61
Discourage	14	13	11
Neither/it depends	30	35	24
Don't know	6	4	4

2000	%		
	Protestant		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	30	40	50
Discourage	14	13	14
Neither/it depends	46	41	31
Don't know	10	7	5

2001	%		
	Protestant		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	42	48	49
Discourage	21	25	16
Neither/it depends	29	23	32
Don't know	9	4	4

Encouragingly for police recruiters, the tendency among younger Catholics to discourage their close relatives from joining the police has shown most signs of movement, recording a marked fall from 43% of 18-29 year olds in 1999 to 24% in 2001. This fall, over successive years, may indicate that police reform has been attractive in making policing a more attractive career option for younger Catholics.

Table 4: Would you encourage a close relative to join the police, discourage them from joining, or neither? – Catholic respondents

1999	%		
	Catholic		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	19	25	37
Discourage	43	38	21
Neither/it depends	36	35	38
Don't know	2	2	5

2000	%		
	Catholic		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	20	19	28
Discourage	34	24	20
Neither/it depends	41	51	46
Don't know	5	7	7

2001	%		
	Catholic		
	18-29	30-45	46+
Encourage	34	24	36
Discourage	24	38	25
Neither/it depends	35	33	35
Don't know	6	14	5

Despite the caution recorded in both communities on the issue of police recruitment, the actual recruitment drive for the Police Service of Northern Ireland was a success. 7700 applications were received in the first round of recruitment, 35% from Catholics.

Over the coming years, and as the reforms set out in the Police Act are enforced, it will be interesting to see if public perceptions of the police change. The 2000 *Life and Times Survey* confirmed that, among Catholics, the *status quo* was not an option. Only one third (34%) believed that the RUC were even-handed in their treatment of each community, virtually unchanged from 1999 (33%). This was despite the partial implementation of the Patten recommendations and the establishment of a Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, almost three quarters of Protestants (73%) believed that the police treated both communities equally, a figure unchanged from 1999. An equally sharp division of opinion was revealed by the finding that almost half of Catholics (47%) believed that the police treated Protestants either a bit or much better, a view shared by only 7% of Protestants. The wider Catholic community clearly harbours the desire for change and many of them see the recruitment of young Catholics as the means to effect that change.

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In 2001, this section of the survey involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 1800 adults in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

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KEY POINTS

- Catholic opinion of joining the police force is fluid. In 2000 23% of Catholics would encourage a close relative to join the police. In 2001 the figure was 32%.
- The largest proportion of Catholics in the 1999-2001 period are in the non-committal 'neither/it depends' category, indicating a 'wait and see' attitude rather than outright negative opinion among many Catholics.
- Protestant support for a close relative joining the police fell sharply from 1999 to 2000, especially among those aged under 30.
- However, the cautious mood within the Catholic and Protestant communities has not deterred applications to the new Police Service of Northern Ireland.
- One third of Catholics believed the police were even-handed in their treatment of each community.
- Nearly half the Catholic respondents thought that the police treated Protestants better – a view shared by only 7% of Protestants.
- Three quarters of Protestants think that the police treat both communities equally.

The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2001, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by *Research and Evaluation Services*.

The *Life and Times Survey* is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors at Queen's University (028 90 273034) with any queries.