

Public confidence in the New South Wales Criminal Justice System

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Introduction

The criminal justice system (CJS) consists of agencies responsible for policing, juvenile justice, the courts and corrections. Establishing and maintaining public confidence in these agencies is critical for the effective functioning of the system as a whole. Improving public confidence in the CJS is one of the goals of the NSW 2021 Plan.

The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) conducted a baseline survey of 2,002 adults in NSW in 2007 measuring a set of headline indicators of confidence in the NSW CJS. The measures were derived from the British Crime Survey (BCS).

A second survey was carried out in March and April 2012 of a random sample of 2,001 adults. With one exception, the same measures of public confidence were administered in the 2012 survey as in the 2007 survey. A range of socio-demographic factors was also collected in each survey to control for any composition effects across the respective survey waves.

This research compared responses in each wave to determine whether confidence had changed and whether factors such as demography, knowledge and punitiveness contributed to these changes.

Aims

To assess

- (1) whether confidence in the New South Wales CJS has changed since 2007
- (2) whether changes in knowledge and/or punitiveness underpin any changes in confidence, and
- (3) whether confidence in police differs from confidence in the courts (in 2012 only).

Data & Method

Both waves of the survey were conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technology. Quotas within age, sex and residential location were set with a 5 per cent tolerance limit to ensure that the resulting samples were reflective of the NSW population on these important characteristics. The 2007 interviews were conducted during the months of August and

Data & Method

September 2007. Interviews for the 2012 survey were conducted during the months of March and April 2012.

Only English speaking people aged 18 years or older were eligible to take part in both surveys.

The nominal response rate (completed interviews divided by the number of completed interviews plus the number of refusals) in 2012 was 28.9 per cent. This compares with a nominal response rate of 11.0 per cent in 2007.

The five (single item) measures of confidence in the CJS that were common to both the 2007 and 2012 surveys were:

- 'How confident are you that the CJS is effective in bringing people who commit crimes to justice?'
- 'How confident are you that the CJS meets the needs of victims?'
- 'How confident are you that the CJS respects the rights of people accused of committing a crime?'
- 'How confident are you that the CJS treats people accused of committing a crime fairly?'
- 'How confident are you that the CJS deals with cases promptly?'

These five items were scored on four-point scales (1 = very confident, 2 = fairly confident, 3 = not very confident, 4 = not at all confident).

Four items were measured across both survey waves to measure knowledge about crime and criminal justice outcomes, including:

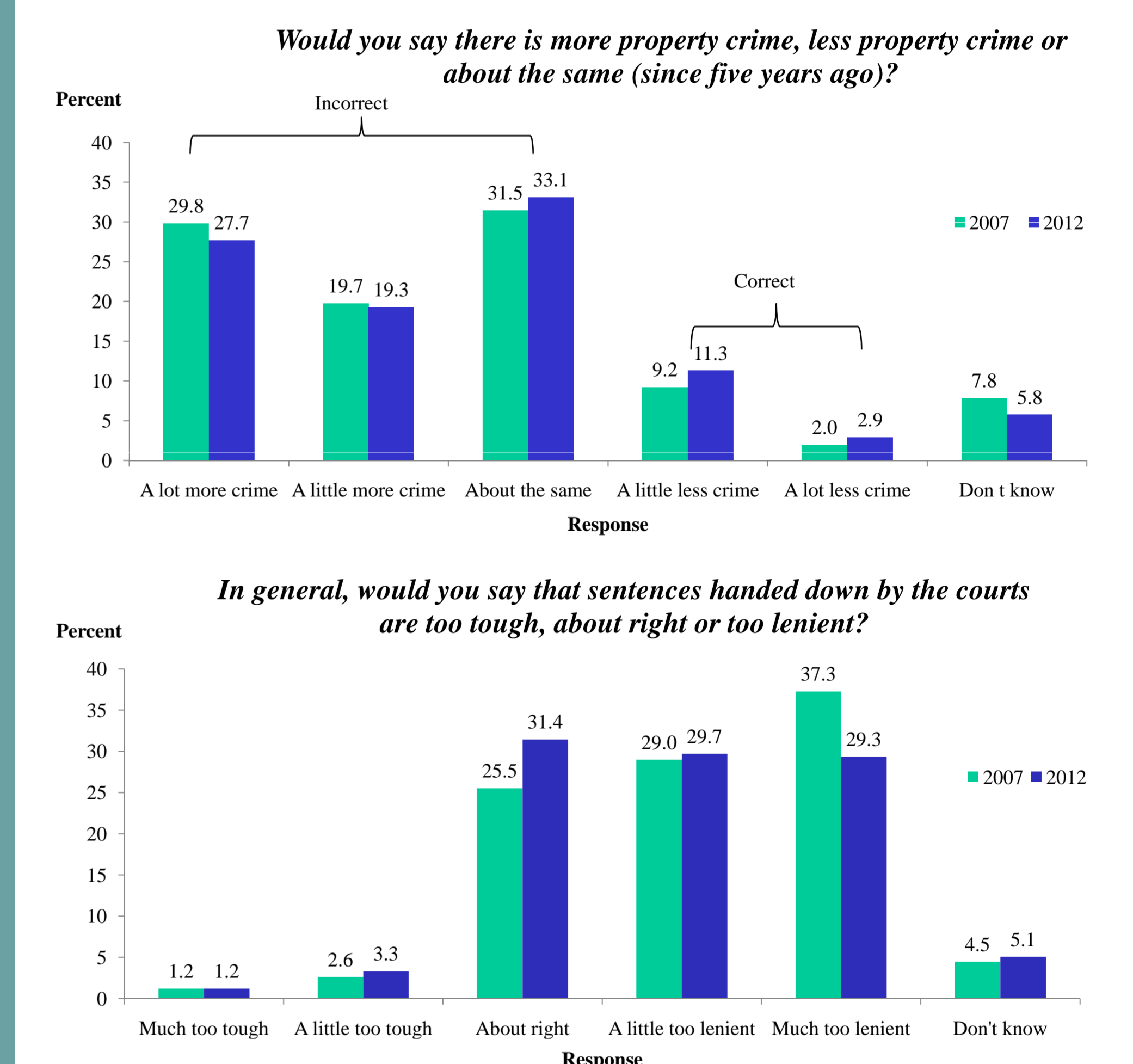
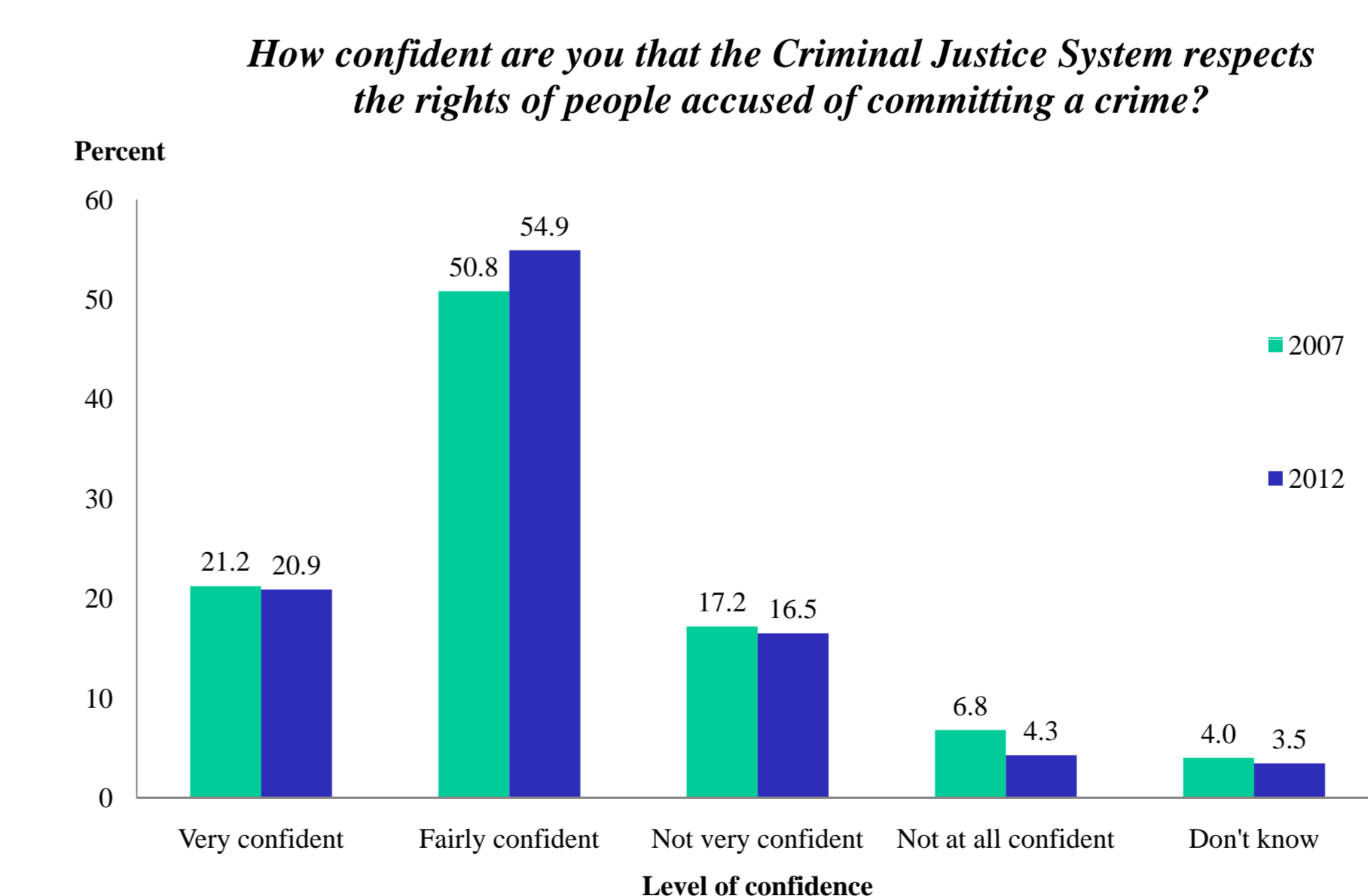
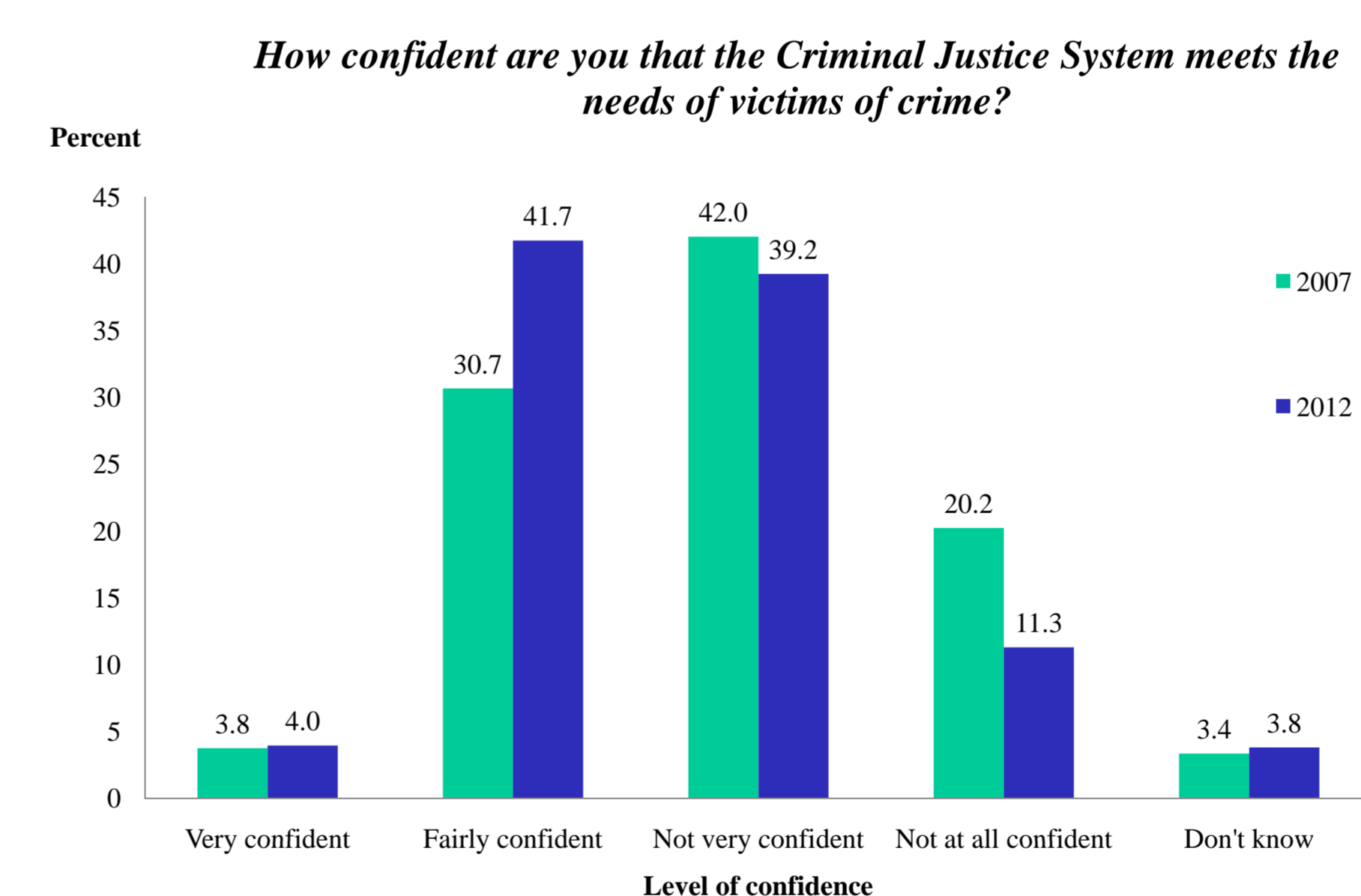
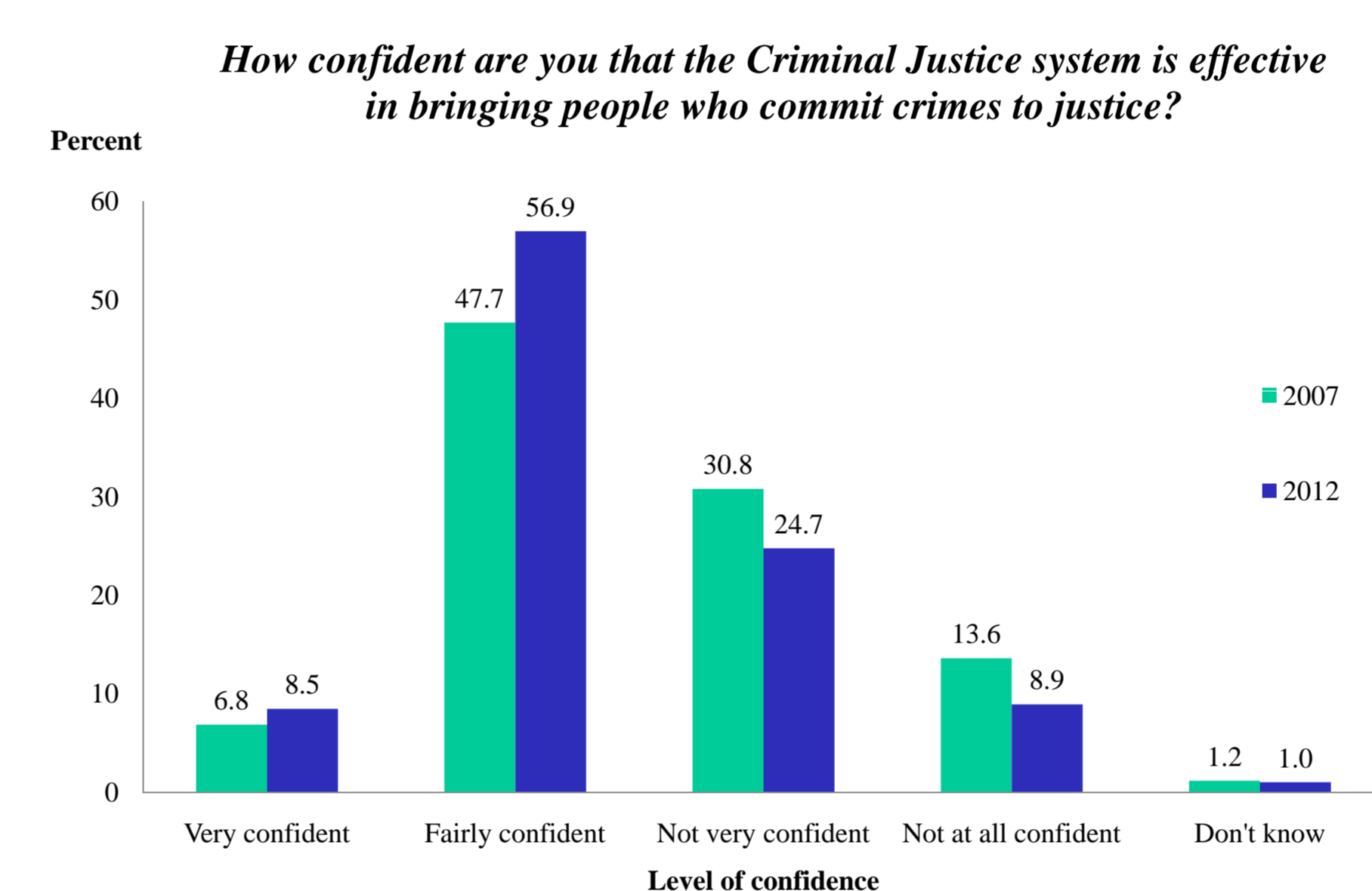
- 'I would like to ask whether you think that the level of property crime in NSW has changed over the past five years. Would you say there is more property crime, less property crime or about the same amount (since five years ago)? Is that a lot or a little more/less? Prompt: If you don't know, please just guess.'

One 'punitiveness' measure was collected across both survey waves:

- 'In general, would you say that sentences handed down by the courts are too tough, about right, or too lenient? Is that a little too tough/lenient or much too tough/lenient?'

This item was scored on a five-point scale (1 = much too tough, 2 = a little too tough, 3 = about right, 4 = a little too lenient, 5 = much too lenient).

Results



Conclusion

- Levels of confidence in the CJS have improved since 2007. The largest effects have been seen in bringing people to justice and meeting the needs of victims. Confidence in treating the accused fairly remained stable.
- Factors such as increased knowledge and decreases in punitiveness may have contributed to these increases. However, the changes in all three measures could reflect other factors such as the effect of the media and public policy.
- While confidence in police is generally high, the public lack confidence in the expediency of the courts and in outcomes for victims.

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