

Tuesday, 29 September 2020

As Victorians' ratings for Police fall, two themes emerge: The 'Lawyer X' scandal and COVID enforcement

Continuing its important independent work tracking the Australian experience through the COVID-19 pandemic, Roy Morgan recently released [findings](#) showing that only 42% of Victorians rate the Victorian Police either 'Very high' (11%) or 'High' (31%) for honesty and ethical standards. This is a significant drop from just three years ago, when 76% rated the force either Very high (37%) or High (49%), making it important to understand the reasons behind those ratings.

We are able to do so because as well as asking respondents to rate their state police force as Very High, High, Average, Low or Very Low, we ask them to explain why they feel that way, in their own words.

Two themes emerge when examining the reasons associated with lower ratings: the 'Lawyer X' scandal and the way COVID restrictions have been enforced.

In a move Victoria Police conceded was "profoundly wrong", the force used barrister Nicola Gobbo as a registered police informer while she was representing accused criminals — identifying her as 'Lawyer X'. Those aged 50-64 were the most likely to cite the case, but it was referred to by respondents in every age-group, with comments including, "*Lawyer X dealings are a disgrace*", "*Their dealings with 'Lawyer X, which undermined the legal system*" and "*Scandals around 'Lawyer X'*".

The other most frequently cited cause for low ratings was disapproval of police actions during the pandemic. Comments here included, "*Because we've seen some disappointing incidents of police brutality recently*", "*Head stomping, pulling people from cars, raids on people's houses for Facebook posts*", "*Too heavy handed, I have lost trust*", and "*They behave like they are above the law. For the first time ever, I'm scared of the police*" — the latter from a respondent aged 65+.

Some gave middling ratings as they weighed up good and bad impressions, such as the respondent with positive views due to "*a family member in the force*" who nonetheless had concerns including, "*the recent aggressive arrests*".

Many of those rating Victoria Police more highly also referred to recent coverage of violent arrests, but saw the officers involved as the exception: "*A few bad apples doesn't tarnish the whole force*", "*The majority of police do the right thing. An organisation shouldn't be tarnished by the actions of a few*", "*I think most police officers are there to help, only a very few seem to abuse their power*".

Roy Morgan CEO Michele Levine says:

"It's always important to understand not just how people feel, but why they feel that way. It's clear Victorians have views across the spectrum on their police force, with many expressing appreciation for the often difficult job police are asked to do while still being concerned about the way that job may be done. But there is no doubting the reputational damage caused by the 'Lawyer X' affair and by some recent violent or aggressive encounters which have been caught on camera and seen widely. Such a large drop over such a short period in the number of Victorians rating their police force as Very High or High for honesty and ethics will surely concern all involved."

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See more examples of representative verbatim respondent quotes on the following page:

Further verbatim quotes from respondents surveyed on Tuesday September 15 – Wednesday September 16, 2020. Respondents were first asked: ‘From what you know or have heard, how would you rate Victorian Police for honesty and ethical standards?’ and the follow up question to gauge opinions asked of respondents was ‘And why do you say that?’

“Lawyer X and the surrounding controversy over unethical police behaviour.”

“The Gobbo issue and attempt by police to justify it.”

“Death of Tanya Day, handling of Nicola Gobbo.”

“The Nicola Gobbo issues are tainting the contemporary leadership.”

“Lawyer X and the surrounding controversy over unethical police behaviour, and the hosing down of that man in his front garden a while ago.”

“Because of the Gobbo case and heavy-handed handling of mental health patients.”

“The Nicola Gobbo case and the overzealous and at times unreasonable application of COVID restrictions and issuing of fines reveals a lack of honesty and ethical standards.”

“Too much force being used at present during protests and COVID policing.”

“Recent footage of behaviour is bad. Looks like bully-boy tactics.”

“There’s no accountability. Police shouldn’t investigate police. Stomping on the head of an unwell man is abhorrent behaviour and if anyone other than a police officer had done it they would be in custody right now.”

“They have taken the last few incidents too far ... I always praise police for the job they do, but I think what’s have been going on of late — they need to calm down, just like everyone else needs to.”

“Excessive use of force particularly with youth, women and people with mental illness. I think they should be trained to use reasonable force and not abuse their position ... I feel we need to police with more compassion and who treat our citizens with respect.”

“We place them on pedestals but recent events have shown some don’t deserve it. We are becoming like America with heavy-handed tactics.”

“Instances of very heavy-handed responses to what seem like minor events. And I find myself looking over my shoulder wondering whether I’ll be considered to be doing the wrong thing.”

“Despite the Gobbo debacle, I believe they believe in upholding law and order.”

“There’s always a few bad eggs but overall I believe the standards are high.”

“Best police in Australia.”

“I appreciate how hard their job is.”

“Great work in challenging times.”

“They have a thankless dangerous job that people find easy to put down unless they need them.”

“In all my dealings with Victoria Police (as a victim of crime) they have been professional, compassionate and so supportive. I am truly blessed to have them in my life.”

About Roy Morgan

Roy Morgan is Australia’s largest independent Australian research company, with offices in each state, as well as in the U.S. and U.K. A full-service research organisation, Roy Morgan has over 75 years’ experience collecting objective, independent information on consumers.

Margin of Error

The margin of error to be allowed for in any estimate depends mainly on the number of interviews on which it is based. Margin of error gives indications of the likely range within which estimates would be 95% likely to fall, expressed as the number of percentage points above or below the actual estimate. Allowance for design effects (such as stratification and weighting) should be made as appropriate.

Sample Size	Percentage Estimate			
	40%-60%	25% or 75%	10% or 90%	5% or 95%
1,000	±3.0	±2.7	±1.9	±1.3