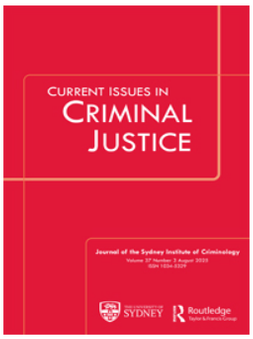
The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland: a model agency for managing complaints against police and optimising police integrity?



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Current Issues in Criminal Justice

ISSN: 1034-5329 (Print) 2206-9542 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcic20

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To cite this article: Tim Prenzler, Michael Maguire & Louise Porter (17 Jul 2025): The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland: a model agency for managing complaints against police and optimising police integrity?, Current Issues in Criminal Justice, DOI: 10.1080/10345329.2025.2517945

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2025.2517945

Published online: 17 Jul 2025.

CURRENT ISSUES IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE
https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2025.2517945

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The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland: a model agency for managing complaints against police and optimising police integrity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the critical issue of independence in police complaints processes through an evaluation of the work of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. Civilian independence from police in handling complaints against police is widely regarded as essential for public confidence in making complaints and for police accountability more generally. The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has been widely acclaimed as the closest example internationally of a 'civilian control' agency. However, it has been the subject of only limited critique. The aim of this paper is to provide a focused assessment of the performance of the Ombudsman against criteria associated with the civilian control model. Based on available research and reports from the Ombudsman, the main finding is that the Ombudsman appears to have made a valuable contribution to police accountability and better policing in Northern Ireland, primarily through the adoption of key features of the civilian control model. At the same time, some areas of possible improvement were also identified, which could also be applicable in other jurisdictions. These include improving the experiences of complainants, reducing complaints, and coverage of police internal complaints and disclosures.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 October 2024
Accepted 5 June 2025

KEYWORDS
complaint reduction; complaints against police; police accountability; police integrity; Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland; police oversight.

Introduction: the challenge of police integrity

Policing in many locations is characterised by recurring conduct scandals and relatively high numbers of citizen complaints compared to other public sector agencies (Prenzler, 2009). Measurable levels of police integrity vary widely around the world. However, the nature of police work entails a range of misconduct risks, including excessive force, discrimination, negligence, bribery and evidence tampering. Policing can also involve internal corruption, including fraud, discrimination, favouritism, bullying and sexual harassment. Misconduct has been associated with opportunity factors—such as offers

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of bribes—as well as frustrations and provocations in enforcing the law. These conditions can be exacerbated by a culture of solidarity and impunity, facilitated by internal complaint management processes that fail to hold officers and managers accountable for misdeeds (Smith, 2018).

As a result of this risk profile, police organisations in most democracies have adopted an array of internal integrity strategies, including ethics training and remedial early intervention systems (Prenzler & Porter, 2022). Oversight agencies represent an external mechanism developed over time to deter misconduct and address internal management limitations. Globally, the number of these agencies in operation is unclear. The Canadian Association for the Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (2024) lists 28 agencies. A 2016 study in the United States identified 144 agencies at a local government level (De Angelis et al., 2016, p. 7). Police oversight is sometimes included within a broad anti-corruption commission, given that misconduct risks occur across the public sector. The more common form, however, involves a specialist agency limited to police (De Angelis et al., 2016).

Oversight agencies are widely seen as essential to mitigate ethical risks in police work and improve public trust and confidence in police (Mashaka et al., 2024; Schulenberg et al., 2017). However, international scholarship has shown that most agencies lack adequate powers to operate effectively (Schulenberg et al., 2017). Consequently, research urgently needs to identify what counts as best practice in this domain, with lessons for police accountability around the world. While a good deal of work has been done at the theoretical level, and in terms of what does not work, there is a shortage of studies of successful practice (Prenzler & Porter, 2022; Schulenberg et al., 2017).

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has frequently been described as embodying 'the gold standard' of oversight, playing a key role in comprehensive reform of policing in Northern Ireland (Hopkins, 2009, p. 43; PONI, 2023a, p. 3; Richards, 2022, p. 289; Savage, 2016, p. 31). One implication is that the Northern Ireland model should be considered in the design of other police oversight agencies (McCulloch & Maguire, 2022; United Nations, 2011). However, its performance has been subject to little academic scrutiny. The present article seeks to address this gap.

There are several publications that include partial quantitative comparative assessments of the Ombudsman's performance, which are now almost a decade old: primarily Porter and Prenzler (2016), Prenzler (2016a, 2016b) and Prenzler and Porter (2016). A more recent, strongly theoretical, study by Boyd and Marnoch (2023) made use of limited quantitative data. A report by Prenzler and Maguire (2022) made use of selected quantitative and qualitative sources, with insider accounts. There are also historical assessments of police reform in Northern Ireland which include observations of the work of the Ombudsman (e.g., Ellison, 2007; Murphy, 2013; Topping, 2016). The present study aims to update and enlarge this work by providing a systematic assessment of the performance of the Ombudsman, based upon the Ombudsman's own publicly-available data and relevant literature.

This article begins by reviewing complaint management models, emphasising the importance of independence from police, compliance with procedural justice, transparency, and oversight agencies working with police to optimise ethical conduct and

minimise complaints. Background material is then presented on the origins of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland before assessing its performance based on available sources. These include data on complaint trends and substantiation rates, complainant and police officer experiences, public perceptions, and the use of informal dispute resolution procedures. These sources relate directly to criteria associated with the core functions and outcomes of a 'civilian control' model of oversight centred on independence through 'a clear institutional separation of the person being investigated from the person doing the investigation' (Prenzler & Ronken, 2001, p. 168; also Council of Europe 2014, p. 44; Savage, 2016). An independent oversight agency is 'staffed by persons wholly unconnected with the Police Department' (Knapp, 1972, p. 14) and operates 'entirely independent(ly) of the police', with 'complete responsibility for the investigation of all complaints against the police' (Seneviratne, 2004, p. 332). The article argues that the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland comes close to meeting these core criteria but would benefit from operationalising a wider set of integrity management strategies.

Models of police oversight and complaints handling

Police complaints and integrity management systems have been analysed using a variety of typologies. Prenzler and Ronken (2001) proposed a three-part model based on the level of independence, or control, ranging from (1) 'internal affairs', (2) 'civilian review' and (3) 'civilian control'. The typology maps degrees of control over complaints from predominantly in-house systems through to substantively independent systems. This framework—detailed below—has been favoured by scholars (Mashaka et al., 2024; Mugari & Olutolab, 2023; O'Brien & Butler, 2018; Puddister & McNabb, 2024; Savage, 2016), civil liberties groups (Hopkins, 2009; Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, 2022), and government and judicial reviews (Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission, 2022; Independent Panel, 2011; Parliament of Victoria, 2018). Most recently, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has been influential in shaping the recommendations of the Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) in Victoria and the Richards (2022) Inquiry in Queensland in terms of greater independence in police integrity management.

For much of the history of policing, complaints and discipline were managed internally. Recurring corruption scandals and high volumes of complaints prompted the creation of 'internal affairs' units to investigate and adjudicate allegations, providing some detachment and the capacity to initiate prevention programs (Prenzler & Ronken, 2001). 'Professional standards unit' is now a more common term. These systems usually operated with a degree of external scrutiny and control, including through elected officials, civil litigation, criminal prosecutions, inquests and judicial inquiries. However, inquiries into police corruption have almost invariably condemned reliance on internal affairs as involving inherent conflicts of interest and inevitable perceptions of bias, signalling the need for independence (Prenzler, 2016c).

Internationally, primarily from the 1970s, governments set up review-style agencies in response to the problems of internal bias and failure. Civilian review agencies take diverse forms, but their main purpose is to provide an independent check on police investigations and discipline without excessive interference in police management. Monitoring

typically involves audits of complaint investigation files, reporting on the quality of police processes, suggesting improvements, and, in some cases, responding to appeals from complainants (Finn, 2001). In some cases, review agencies have been associated with improvements in complaint substantiation rates, public confidence and police practices (Criminal Justice Commission, 1997; De Angelis et al., 2016; Porter, 2016). Nonetheless, they have also been universally criticised for lacking the means to independently investigate and adjudicate complaints, contributing to deficient discipline and ongoing misconduct (Fitzgerald, 1989; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2013; Schulenberg et al., 2017). Review agencies often appear to be independent, but complainants experience a double betrayal when their grievance is referred to police (Landau, 1996; Criminal Justice Commission, 1997, p. 67). This approach has a particularly profound resonance for minority groups, who feel that racial discrimination is perpetuated through weak oversight (Johnston, 1991, s 29.5.23; Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, 2022). In that regard, review agencies—ostensibly tasked with policing the police—typify Brodeur's (2010) concept of 'high policing' in adopting a highly selective, legalistic, elitist and tokenistic approach to their task.

In terms of principles of justice, review systems fail to satisfy fundamental criteria of procedural justice (Schulenberg et al., 2017), provoking critiques by civil liberties bodies (Amnesty International, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 1998; Liberty, 2000; Police Accountability Project, 2017). Limited review processes violate core procedural justice principles; formulated by Tyler (2003) in terms of 'voice, neutrality, respect and trust' (350). Police complaints processes are also increasingly being viewed through a human rights lens (Hopkins, 2016; Smith, 2018). A United Nations (2011, p. 70) review of oversight mechanisms, with a focus on optimising police compliance with human rights standards, concluded that successful oversight requires 'full operational and hierarchical independence from the police'.

'Civilian control' describes a best practice form of oversight. The agency processes all complaints and disclosures involving police with a range of inquisitorial powers free of undue influence (Prenzler & Ronken, 2001). The agency is statutorily independent of the police and government, with the majority of staff from outside policing backgrounds and no current or former officers from the regulated police agency. Complaints are investigated and adjudicated 'by the agency itself, rather than merely reviewing cases' (Prenzler & Ronken, 2001, p. 177). Given their independence, these agencies are also suitable to operate mediation programs between complainants and police, consistent with restorative justice principles. A key function is to assess the effectiveness of police prevention strategies. At the same time, civilian control agencies should work with police professional standards units to develop effective corruption prevention and complaint reduction strategies, with the aim of reducing the number of complaints made by civilians through more professional policing (Porter, 2016). The core principle of institutional independence in the model is strongly supported in public opinion surveys (Ilchi et al., 2022; Kwon & Wortley, 2022; Prenzler, 2016a) and by complainants (Maguire & Corbett, 1991; Porter & Prenzler, 2016; Worden et al., 2018) and police (Liberty, 2000; Maguire & Corbett, 1991; Prenzler, 2016b; Shea et al., 2024). Scholars have identified one agency—the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland—which most closely resembles the civilian control model (McCulloch & Maguire, 2022; Seneviratne, 2004).

Police reform in Northern Ireland and the establishment of the Police Ombudsman

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland became operational in late-2000 in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement ended the Northern Ireland 'troubles', which had lasted for 30 years and resulted in over 3,500 deaths (Murphy, 2013, p. 13). The establishment of the Ombudsman occurred as part of a major reform program, including the restructuring of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Policing during the conflict was a contested space and the RUC had limited support from within the Catholic community. In 1995, in the lead up to the Agreement, the government appointed Maurice Hayes (1997) to review the police complaints system. According to Hayes, 'On the vexed question of public order … almost two-thirds of Catholics had little or no confidence in the fairness of the police' (p. 7). The existing civilian review-style Independent Commission for Police Complaints was characterised as exemplifying all the standard problems of the civilian review model in failing to properly expose, sanction or prevent misconduct, and in losing stakeholder confidence. The primary problem lay in the fact that all complaints were investigated by police and disciplinary decisions were dominated by police (Hayes, 1997, pp. 38–40). Hayes was clear about the central problem with complaints management: 'The overwhelming message I got from nearly all sides and from all political parties was the need for the investigation to be independent and to be seen to be independent' (v). To fix the problem, Hayes recommended that 'the Complaints Body should have complete control of the process' (p. 47). Despite this, Hayes endorsed a transition back to police control of intermediate and minor matters following an initial reform period. Subsequently, the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland (1999)—charged with making recommendations for democratic and accountable policing—supported a 'fully independent Ombudsman' (p. 37), free from any influence from police, including capacity to investigate any matters and to analyse complaint patterns and address problems in cooperation with the Police Service (p. 111).

The Ombudsman was never intended to act as a solo accountability institution driving police integrity and reform (McCulloch & Maguire, 2022). Changes to policing were made in tandem with other reforms to the criminal justice system. These included the establishment of an independent Director of Public Prosecutions, and protections for persons in custody through the work of the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Policing Board (2020) is intended to be a representative body with management oversight of the police. It has responsibilities for promoting compliance with human rights standards and encouraging close engagement between the police and the community. The UK Criminal Cases Review Commission also has capacity to investigate potential miscarriages of justice, many of which derive from initial actions by police.

Method

The study integrates secondary and primary sources—based on searches of Criminal Justice Database (Proquest) and Criminal Justice Abstracts (EBSCO) and general internet

searches—with the primary data consisting of information and statistics at the Ombudsman's website. Sources were selected for their relevance to issues around the management of police complaints in Northern Ireland. There were no restrictions in terms of date of publication. In that regard, the study also assesses the quality of transparency and accountability of the Ombudsman. The focus is on the management of 'current policing' complaints, rather than complaints about 'historical matters', given the wider relevance of this aspect (PONI, 2020b, p. 24 and 16; see Maguire, 2023 on issues associated with legacy investigations). The results also provide a useful framework for more in-depth studies, utilising interviews for example, to obtain a better understanding of processes and outcomes involved in the Ombudsman's work.

The following findings section organises outcomes data and assessments under headings based on the key themes associated with the civilian control model. As described earlier, this includes the extent of operating the fundamental functions of independent complaints handling, as well as complaints mediation and efforts to prevent or minimise misconduct and, therefore, complaints. In line with these functions and associated expected outcomes, the criteria against which the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland is evaluated are: the independent handling of complaints, complaint trends, complaint dispositions and substantiation rates, mediation and informal resolution, complainant experiences, police views, public perceptions, and indicators of security and confidence in police (Ilchi et al., 2022; Kwon & Wortley, 2022; Liberty, 2000; Maguire & Corbett, 1991; McCulloch & Maguire, 2022; Porter, 2016; Prenzler, 2016a, 2016b; Prenzler & Ronken, 2001; Seneviratne, 2004; Shea et al., 2024; Worden et al., 2018). The data sources derive primarily from the Ombudsman, hence the findings section begins with a discussion of transparency and information sharing to acknowledge potential criticisms of bias. However, there has not been any evidence of manipulation of results. The data evidence a willingness to be self-critical and transparent. In some cases, the results are set against targets, including many results below target. Further, each of these subsections provides an overview of relevant data and research utilising a comparative perspective wherever possible.

Findings: assessing the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Transparency and information sharing

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has a detailed reporting structure which appears unique internationally (Porter & Prenzler, 2016; Prenzler, 2016a, 2016b). The Ombudsman provides statistical information to a range of bodies including the Police Service, Policing Board and the Department of Justice. The website provides annual data on complaints and allegations received by the Ombudsman, as well as trend information for five years. The reports are produced independently by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Other data cover complainant and subject officer experiences, and public awareness and confidence. An 'equality monitoring' component of the complainant survey includes questions across a wide range of demographic categories including religious affiliation (PONI 2023a, 31). Key data are matched against ambitious performance targets (PONI, 2023a, p. 10). Complaint disposition data are also reported on an annual basis, as are the details of more prominent cases, including findings supporting and criticising police actions.

All of these publicly available data are subject to a UK Statistics Authority (2022) *Code of Practice*. The code sets out three primary governing principles (p. 4):

> First, those producing statistics must demonstrate their integrity and professionalism. Their behaviours and actions should reflect the public interest as shown in their public commitments, attitudes and processes. Above all, the confidentiality of individuals and of business information must be protected.
>
> Secondly, statistics have to be based on the right data sources, with transparent judgements about definitions and methods, and judgements about the strengths and limitations of the statistics. Producers should demonstrate how they assure themselves that their statistics are robust and reliable.
>
> Thirdly, statistics must be equally available to all, and not be released partially or to selected audiences. They should be aimed at society's important questions and be produced efficiently. Producers need to constantly connect to users so their needs can be anticipated and statistics kept up to date.

The Office for Statistics Regulation, within the Authority, is responsible for independent audits and reviews of the quality of publicly reported data. There is also a system for managing complaints and correcting errors (PONI, 2025).

The statistics and reports are also scrutinised by multiple agencies who operate independently of the Ombudsman. For example, information is used by the Police Service to monitor trends and patterns in complaints, including problem areas requiring remediation. The data supplied to police by the Ombudsman's statistical team includes information about individual officers attracting multiple complaints. This information has been used as part of successful complaint reduction strategies by the Police Service (see below). The data are also used by the Policing Board to enhance their understanding of police conduct issues attracting public concern (Prenzler & Maguire, 2022). Searching across 25 years of reports and critiques, the authors of the present article were unable to find any criticisms of the reliability of the official statistics associated with the Ombudsman's work, although we do identify some shortcomings and areas where improvements can be made (below).

Independent handling of complaints

The Ombudsman was established by the *Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998*. It is located within, but is statutorily independent of, the Department of Justice, and is an entirely separate agency from the Police Service. Section 51(4) of the Act makes the Ombudsman responsible for the police complaints and discipline system:

> The Ombudsman shall exercise his powers under this Part in such manner and to such extent as appears to him to be best calculated to secure—
>
> (a) the efficiency, effectiveness and independence of the police complaints system; and
> (b) the confidence of the public and of members of the police force in that system.

Despite discretion to devolve responsibilities, successive Ombudsmen have maintained direct control over all complaints (PONI, 2016, p. 1). The published values of the Ombudsman cover procedural justice and human rights principles, including a commitment to complete impartiality, fidelity to the evidence, respect for all parties, and providing complete explanations for decisions (PONI, 2023a, p. 25). The Ombudsman as a

Corporation Sole, appointed by Royal Warrant. The Ombudsman is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and is required to consider guidance from the Department of Finance and Department of Justice (PONI, 2021). The operational protocol between Ombudsman and the DoJ specifically excludes any DoJ interference in the casework of the Ombudsman.

The jurisdiction of the Ombudsman covers the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as well as seven smaller agencies. In 2023 it had 147 staff FTE, with 100 working in 'complaints and investigation' (PONI, 2023a, p. 61). The bulk of the work comes from citizen complaints, although the Ombudsman has the discretion to investigate more serious matters that come to its attention without a complaint. The Ombudsman undertakes automatic investigations into deaths in custody and weapons discharges by police. Up until May 2024, it had a role in investigating serious matters of an historical nature to do with the 'Troubles'. The Ombudsman has the power to publish the findings of its investigations without political or police interference.

Ombudsman investigators have the same powers as a police constable, with authority for searches, seizures and arrests (Prenzler & Maguire, 2022). Police officers can be interviewed under caution. Police must provide information to investigators, including video footage. Matters deemed as criminal cases are referred to the public prosecutor. In the case of a decision not to prosecute, or a not guilty verdict, officers can face investigation for misconduct at the civil standard of evidence. This can result in a recommendation for discipline or remedial action to the Chief Constable, who is responsible for enforcing discipline. Sections 59(5)(b) and (6)(a) of the Act state that if 'the Chief Constable is unwilling to bring (the recommended) disciplinary proceedings, the Ombudsman may, after consultation with the Chief Constable, direct him to bring disciplinary proceedings … it shall be the duty of the Chief Constable to comply with a direction under subsection (5)'. However, while the Ombudsman can direct a hearing, they cannot determine the outcome. In 2020, the Ombudsman recommended changes to the Act to ensure that police disciplinary panels include a chair with legal qualifications and lay representation, along with an option for public hearings (PONI, 2020a). However, the Act remains unchanged.

Investigative staff within the Ombudsman are drawn from a variety of backgrounds including social welfare, other ombudsmen, military and auditing sectors, as well as through training and experience within the Ombudsman (Prenzler & Maguire, 2022). Staff from outside a policing background complete the Accredited Investigator Training Program delivered by Portsmouth University. The issue of the role of former police attracted attention in 2011 when a review found that some investigations into legacy cases might have lacked adequate independence (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, 2011). However, the review supported the Ombudsman's independence in processing contemporary complaints. The review noted that 'there is a substantial proportion of investigative staff (around 41%) from a former police background' (p. 32). Nonetheless, when selection standards and 'operational protocols' were considered, the review found that, 'in the main, the necessary safeguards are in place to protect the operational independence of the Police Ombudsman' (p. 32; see also PONI, 2016). In other words, it was deemed that the Ombudsman operated free

from influence from the police. At the same time, the Ombudsman has argued that the governing legislation should be amended to ensure that the Ombudsman is not from a policing background (PONI, 2020a). The integrity of the investigative process is also determined by line management arrangements (including interventions by senior management) and a Quality Assurance Board.

Complaint trends

As noted above, a long-term reduction in complaints is a common expectation associated with the work of a civilian control agency in addressing police conduct issues lying behind complaints. Prenzler and Porter (2016) reviewed long-term complaint trends, finding that complaint numbers increased for two years following the creation of the Ombudsman. This was considered 'consistent with the view that a more open and independent system will attract more complaints' (p. 61). Subsequently, complaints fluctuated for eight years, then trended down slightly across the last four years of the study, from 3,542 in 2009/10 to 3,265 in 2012/13 (−8%). At the same time, 'in a more promising trend, the number of allegations fell more sharply and consistently', from 6,501 to 5,200 (−20%) (p. 61; see also Boyd & Marnoch, 2023). Multiple complaints against individual officers also declined.

The downturn in complaints coincided with a 'focused PSNI Complaints Reduction Strategy', beginning in 2010, which boosted the existing partnership with the Ombudsman to improve police conduct (PONI, 2013, p. 6). Ombudsman recommendations implemented by the police included the areas of 'search procedures, baton usage, firing of baton rounds, vehicle pursuits, handcuffing, and police responses to hate crimes and child abuse … two areas of cooperation that appear to have been particularly fruitful involved measures to address incivility allegations and duty failure allegations related to investigations' (Prenzler & Porter, 2016, pp. 61–62). These outcomes are significant when viewed in comparative perspective. There are few studies in the literature showing substantial downward trends in complaints against police. Nonetheless, some studies have shown much larger sustained reductions—between 60% and 80% for example—associated with a wider range of complaint reduction strategies, including early intervention systems (Prenzler & Porter, 2022).

The last five years to 2023/24 have shown some regression. Complaints trended upwards, from 2,529 to 3,353 (PONI, 2024c, p. 8). Allegation numbers also increased, although multiple complaints (three or more) against individual officers declined slightly. The main area where complaints increased was in the category 'criminal investigation', although details were not provided (p. 12). The 2023 annual report noted that the increase in complaints had imposed stress on staff. This was particularly the case for reception staff, given the fact that a proportion of complainants had mental health concerns (PONI, 2023a, p. 2).

Complaint dispositions and substantiation rates

Higher complaint substantiation rates are an additional expectation associated with civilian control of complaints against police. Three studies have briefly examined the issue of dispositions for complaints managed by the Ombudsman (Boyd & Marnoch, 2023; Prenzler, 2009; Prenzler & Porter, 2016). These studies were hampered by the absence of

consistent data from before and after the establishment of the Ombudsman, and between the Ombudsman and other types of complaints management systems. The figure of a 10% substantiation rate is sometimes reported as a rough average for police-dominated systems (Prenzler, 2009, p. 168). The principles underpinning the civilian control suggest that much higher substantiation rates would occur in independent systems. However, this is not the ultimate test of effectiveness and even the most rigorous systems will be hampered by the common problem of inadequate evidence in citizen complaints (Worden et al., 2018). Consequently, it is perhaps not surprising that two studies found that the apparent substantiation rates from Ombudsman reports were only marginally above 10% (Prenzler, 2009, p. 168; Prenzler & Porter, 2016, p. 16). Boyd and Marnoch's (2023) analysis of complaint dispositions for 2017–2018—which included data obtained through a freedom of information application—concluded that 8% of complaints were 'determined to be justified' and 0.2% led to a decision for criminal prosecution (p. 276).

These attrition rates for complaints were seen as challenging the legitimacy of the Ombudsman, necessitating other sources of validation (Boyd & Marnoch, 2023). One source has been the Ombudsman's reporting on the Police Service's acceptance, and presumed implementation, of recommendations for improved procedures. Over three years the acceptance rate was 77%, indicating 'a significant source of pragmatic legitimacy for the OPONI' (Boyd & Marnoch, 2023, p. 277). Another source is discipline-oriented outcomes. Prenzler and Porter (2016) found that Police Service acceptance of Ombudsman recommended dispositions averaged 97%. However, responses from both the public prosecutor and the police are no longer reported, and the Ombudsman (PONI, 2020a) has recommended that more data be reported to complainants and the public on complaint dispositions.

The available data on dispositions for 2023/24 showed that complaints 'substantiated or an issue of concern' numbered 145, or 12.6% of 1,449 complaints 'closed following a full investigation' (PONI, 2024b, p. 33). Thirteen matters were referred to the public prosecutor, 92 to an 'unsatisfactory performance procedure', 112 to a 'misconduct meeting' and four to a 'misconduct hearing' (p. 34). These numbers have fluctuated over the longer term. For example, the substantiation rate, in the above terms, increased for a period and reached an average of almost a quarter, at 24%, for six years from 2012/13 to 2017/18, before declining (PONI, 2024a, Table 12). There has also been a reduction, since 2017/18, in the number of disciplinary and performance improvement options, and a trend towards what could be considered as lighter disciplinary recommendations (PONI, 2024C, Tables 13–15).

Mediation and informal resolution

Informal dispute resolution, including mediation, has been shown in numerous studies to be successful in addressing many of the concerns of complainants and police officers about impartiality and being heard. This approach provides a restorative justice alternative to the overly detached and legalistic formal investigations processes often entailed in internal affairs and review-style oversight agency processes (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2014; Worden et al., 2018). The Ombudsman trialled mediation with 26 complaints in 2008/09. Only one meeting was concluded, reportedly 'successfully' (PONI, 2009,

p. 20). The remaining offers were rejected by complainants and police, primarily due to a preference for formal investigations, and it appears that mediation was then excluded from the options for responding to complaints. This is despite the fact that the literature shows that complainant and police satisfaction with mediation can reach levels as high as 80% (Porter & Prenzler, 2016; Prenzler, 2016b).

The Ombudsman's governing legislation allows for police-led informal resolution. The number of complaints referred for this option increased from 250 in 2019/20 to 363 in 2023/24 (PONI, 2024c, p. 35). The percentages deemed 'successful'—without elaboration—averaged 72% over five years. An evaluation of informal resolution published in 2005 found that 52% of complainants were satisfied that their complaint had been 'successfully resolved' (PONI, 2005, p. 29). Since then, it appears that participant experience surveys in this area have lapsed and the role of informal resolution in overall complainant satisfaction is not clear. Again, this is despite the fact that comparative data, although mixed, show that complainant and police experiences with police-led informal resolution can reach above 75% (Porter & Prenzler, 2016; Prenzler, 2016b).

Complainant experiences

The idea of civilian control includes a much better experience for complainants, particularly in terms of impartiality and associated procedural justice criteria, in comparison to internal affairs and civilian review models of complaint handling. Porter and Prenzler (2016) reviewed 10 complainant surveys by the Ombudsman—from 2002/03 to 2013/14. Overall satisfaction averaged 57%, outcome satisfaction averaged 40%, and satisfaction with the process was 67% (p. 84). The satisfaction rates were well above those reported in police-dominated and review-style systems (pp. 77-83). For example, Porter and Prenzler (2016) reviewed 25 studies of complainant satisfaction in 'police dominated systems' (p. 77). In all but one case, the large majority of complainants—averaging 71%—were dissatisfied. While lack of communication and timeliness were issues, perceived bias was a common problem, with a general preference expressed for independent processes. In nine surveys of complainants in review agencies—or 'mixed systems'—

Table 1. Complainant satisfaction, Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, percentages, 2023/24.

Treated with respect	81
Treated fairly	67
Easy to understand	79
Knowledgeable	68
Advice received from the Ombudsman	43
Length of time to reply	54
Clarity of explanation	51
Frequency of updates	38
Clarity of correspondence	49
Manner of treatment of complaint	43
Overall time to resolve complaint	43
Understood the final decision	49
Accept the final decision*	78
Dealt with independently	47
Use again	54

*'Of those who understood the reason the (Ombudsman) gave for reaching the final decision about the complaint'. PONI, 2024f, p. 8. N = 345.

all except one showed high levels of dissatisfaction (p. 81). Large majorities also supported the independent processing for their complaint.

Porter and Prenzler's (2016) study also identified a long-term decline in overall complainant satisfaction with the Ombudsman's processes, from 67% in 2003/04 to 50% in 2013/14. These lower ratings have persisted. Table 1 shows the most recent figures for 2023/24. While still above typical results for internal and review systems, many of the findings remain stuck below 50%. The question on independence was at a concerning 47%, although fairness of treatment was much better at 67% and 'acceptance of the final decision' was at 78%. The Ombudsman stopped measuring overall satisfaction in 2018/19, shifting the focus to procedural elements of satisfaction (PONI, 2019, p. 16).

Police views

As key stakeholders in the complaints process, police are also expected to have a more positive experience of complaints processing under a civilian control model. Prenzler's (2016b) review of eight surveys of police officers subject to investigation by the Ombudsman found that overall satisfaction averaged 70% and satisfaction with outcomes was 86%. Impartiality was given an average score of 91% and the fairness of the Ombudsman's processes was supported by 83% of respondents. In addition, an average of 71% of investigated officers agreed that the independent complaints system 'makes police more accountable' (in Prenzler, 2016b, pp. 109–111). Comparisons with findings from police-dominated and review-style systems were complicated by wide variations in results. However, overall, officer views of their experiences with the Northern Ireland system were well above available averages in most other systems, prompting the conclusion that 'police fears about civilian investigators not understanding their situation and favouring complainants are likely to be unfounded in a system that is both independent and puts a high premium on procedural justice' (p. 115). The most recent findings, shown in Table 2, confirm this view; although some process aspects—such as timeliness, explanations and frequency of updates—have deteriorated substantially. 'Overall satisfaction' and satisfaction with the outcome are no longer reported.

The views of officers subject to investigation often contrast with those of representative organisations (Prenzler & Maguire, 2022, pp. 30–32). The Royal Ulster Constabulary Retired Officers Association has been extremely critical of the Ombudsman, at times calling for the Ombudsman's resignation. Much of this criticism has

Table 2. Subject officer satisfaction, Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, Percentages, 2023/24.

Independent dealing	77
Treated with respect	89
Fairness of treatment	75
Staff knowledge-able	75
Explanation of the process	48
Manner of treatment	51
Staff easy to understand	87
Timeliness to resolve	35
Frequency of updates	33
Clarity of correspondence	46
System makes police more accountable	59

PONI, 2024g, pp. 7–10. N = 279.

been in response to the Ombudsman's legacy investigations into the actions of the Constabulary during the conflict. The Police Federation (the rank-and-file union) initially welcomed the establishment of the Ombudsman. However, it has been critical in relation to legacy reports and aspects of current investigations (PONI, 2020b). In 2018, the Chairman of the Federation 'called for independent oversight of the Ombudsman and for redress for officers who had been subject to what he called malicious complaints' (PONI, 2020b, p. 29).

Public perceptions

The Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has achieved high levels of public awareness and support—also considered a key test for civilian control agencies. Prenzler's (2016a) review of public surveys on the Ombudsman were averaged over five years to 2012/2013, with the following results (p. 68):

- 79% of respondents … expressed confidence in the Ombudsman dealing with complaints impartially;
- 85% were confident of being treated fairly if they made a complaint;
- 83% viewed the Ombudsman as being independent of police; and
- 85% believed the Ombudsman would 'help ensure that the police do a good job'.

These ratings were similar to those from available surveys for review agencies—although, given that review agencies often appear to be independent (as noted earlier in the literature review), it was likely that respondents were generally unaware of the limitations of these agencies and most likely envisaged them as embodying the civilian control model (Prenzler, 2016a, p. 67).

High levels of public awareness of, and confidence in, the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland have persisted, although with some declines. In summary form, the most recent data available, for 2023, are as follows (PONI, 2023b, p. 5; see this and preceding reports for details on survey methodology and validity):

- 90% of respondents had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office.
- 88% that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office were aware that it is independent from the police.
- 64% that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office were confident that complaints were dealt with in an impartial way.
- 73% that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office felt they would be treated fairly if they made a complaint.
- 72% that had heard of the Police Ombudsman's Office felt the Office would help ensure the police do a good job.

An important finding here was that self-identified Catholics and Protestants had similar positive views of the Ombudsman—although with Catholics somewhat less positive. According to the 2021 census, 43% of citizens were from 'Protestant or other Christian backgrounds', compared to 46% from a 'Catholic background' (Carroll, 2022, p. 1). Information for 2023/24 showed that 58% of complainants identified as a 'member of the Protestant community' and 28% as Catholic (PONI, 2024e, p. 9). The proportionately lower rate of complaints from Catholics might be a product of less confidence in the

police complaints process, although this is not consistent with the public opinion data. For example, the proportions for Protestants and Catholics in relation to the perceived impartiality of the Ombudsman were 68% and 64% respectively, and 77% and 70% for perceived fair treatment when making a complaint (PONI, 2023b, p. 8 and 9). Conversely, the percentage of Catholic respondents who thought that the Ombudsman 'will help ensure that the police do a good job' was 77% compared to 71% of Protestants (p. 10).

Indicators of security and public confidence in police

Civilian control agencies should also make a positive contribution to overall indicators of police effectiveness. Despite the Ombudsman having been established 24 years ago, there has been limited research on its impact on policing. Available studies, drawing mainly on public confidence surveys, point to an important role in helping with the acceptance of the Police Service within the nationalist/Catholic community (e.g., Ellison, 2007) and on improvements in operational policing (e.g., PONI, 2020b). Elllison stated that, 'Of all the reform proposals, the establishment of a fully independent police complaints machinery has been vital in generating legitimacy for the new policing structures. Without the establishment of the [Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland], the entire reform process would have stalled years ago, and its role in enhancing the legitimacy of the PSNI should not be underestimated' (p. 261). Topping (2016) observed that, in a contested space, the structure of police accountability had become a means to 'measure' and 'signpost' major change away from a militaristic-style of policing towards a more community-based style (p. 153). Topping also argued that, in assuring independence in the complaints process, the 'return on investment in the [Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland] … is incalculable in terms of its worth to societal trust and confidence in the police' (p. 155). More specifically, Orde and Rea (2016) examined the importance of the Ombudsman's reports on improving covert policing and the role of the Ombudsman and the Policing Board on developing a more transparent and accountable culture within the Police Service.

Discussion

The descriptive material on the powers and functions of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the comparative performance data reviewed in this study showed a range of substantial achievements. Overall, it appears that the Ombudsman's statutory and operational separation from the police, its management of complaints, and its work with the Police Service have made important contributions to the success of the police reform project in Northern Ireland, the wider peace process, and the accountability of the police (cf., Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2005; Murphy, 2013; Topping, 2016). This achievement is represented in part in high levels of cross-partisan support for the impartiality and effectiveness of the police. In addition, when performance data for the Ombudsman are compared to those for both police-dominated and review-style agencies, the achievements become more evident particularly in terms of the higher rates of stakeholder satisfaction. The updated evidence assessed for the present study supports the common view in the academic literature that, 'The PONI has demonstrated that a strong civilian control model can work' (Seneviratne, 2004,

p. 341). Much of the success of the Ombudsman can be attributed to its adoption of key features of civilian control. These include the independent processing of complaints, the adoption of strong procedural justice and human rights standards, working with police to improve officer conduct, and transparency in public reporting on cases and statistics. These features have meant that the agency has avoided some of the traps of detached 'high policing' agencies (Brodeur, 2010)—including a dismissive attitude towards the concerns of ordinary citizens. Studies suggest that the model might also meet justice criteria and improve police accountability in non-Western countries—subject to culturally-appropriate needs analyses (Ho et al., 2022; dela Rama & Lester, 2019; Mashaka et al., 2024; Mugari & Olutolab, 2023).

While the Ombudsman appears to tick many of the boxes for best practice, the available evidence indicates room for improvement consistent with the civilian control model. One issue in the design of oversight agencies concerns what constitutes independence from police in terms of personnel. The Ombudsman appears to have found a suitable balance in ensuring operational independence and stakeholder confidence while utilising the skills of ex-police, with a minority of investigators with a police background from outside and within Northern Ireland carefully selected and subject to conflict of interest controls (PONI, 2016, 2024d). At the same time, as outlined above, there are areas where the legislation could be amended to strengthen the independence of the Ombudsman. Examples include ensuring that the Ombudsman is not a former police officer and greater lay involvement on disciplinary panels.

Complainant satisfaction is one area where improvements are highly desirable. It is possible that more probing research would show a way forward here. Many of the results for complainant satisfaction are below target, as they are for police satisfaction. On current indicators, the problem would seem to lie primarily with process aspects of complaints management, so that a boost to resources might be appropriate to speed up through-puts and ensure better communication. External involvement in disciplinary panels might also aid complainants' perceptions of a procedural justice. In some cases, a victim support approach to complainants is also an option worth considering (Prenzler & Maguire, 2022, p. 36). Mediation provides another means of improving satisfaction. Surveys support the view that the face-to-face aspects of mediation are a key factor in high participant satisfaction (Bartels & Silverman, 2005; Schaible et al., 2012; Young et al., 2005). Mediation has been so successful in these studies that it could be considered as a default option for most complaints and worth a renewed effort in Northern Ireland, as recommended by the Ombudsman (PONI, 2020a, p. 29).

Addressing the upward trend in complaints is another area where improvements might be made to reduce dissatisfaction with police. Improvements might be achieved through a renewed 'focused PSNI Complaints Reduction Strategy' (PONI, 2013, p. 6), with data-driven changes to procedures and training. This approach has been shown to be effective elsewhere, including with early intervention systems and with a wider range of performance indicators, including firearms discharges, use-of-force reports, litigation, high speed pursuits, and officer and citizen injuries (Engel et al., 2022; James et al., 2023; Porter, 2016; Porter et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2020). More female and graduate officers should also lead to reduced complaints.

Another issue concerns the absence of police internal complaints and disclosures from the Ombudsman's jurisdiction. The protection of police officers and police staff from

discrimination and persecution is a key rationale for the civilian control model (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1989; Knapp, 1972; Wood, 1997). This does not appear to have been a major issue in Northern Ireland but one which bears investigation. Some coverage is available currently through the Ombudsman's own motion power, but comprehensive coverage might be desirable. Extension of the investigation and adjudication system to former officers and all civilian employees and police contractors is also a consideration (PONI, 2020a). One argument against such an approach is that it could involve the Ombudsman in human resource issues within the Police Service, an area it would be ill-equipped to deal with effectively within its current resource allocation.

Conclusion

Police misconduct is a universal problem that requires comprehensive preventive interventions. The literature shows that pro-active complaints management is one essential mechanism. The civilian control model optimises police accountability and misconduct prevention through the independent civilian-based management of complaints, in a process completely external to the police agency, alongside cooperative integrity management. This article has addressed the question of the extent to which the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland embodies the principles of the civilian control model. The Ombudsman's structure and operations were assessed using available performance data across the topics and criteria of transparency and information sharing, independent handling of complaints, complaint trends, complaint dispositions and substantiation rates, mediation and informal resolution, complainant experiences, police views, public perceptions, and indicators of security and public confidence in police.

Overall, the successes of the Ombudsman to-date are closely associated with independent and procedurally just complaints management. At the same time, there are areas where the functions of the Ombudsman could be improved, consistent with a comprehensive civilian control model. These include consideration of means to improve stakeholder experiences, especially for complainants; inclusion of internal complaints and disclosures in the Ombudsman's remit; and facilitation of a wider set of integrity strategies.

While only one case study site, the research suggests that jurisdictions that adopt the Northern Ireland system should see large improvements in stakeholder confidence in the police and in responses to complaints. This would appear to be dependent nonetheless on the oversight agency being part of a larger reform program and set of strong accountability institutions. Further research would test these views in other settings and also advance research into the Northern Ireland example utilising interviews with key informants and a wider range of comparative performance measures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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