

**From:** Tim Prenzler [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Friday, 24 January 2020 11:38 AM  
**To:** Parliamentary Crime and Corruption Committee <pccc@parliament.qld.gov.au>  
**Subject:** Submission to the Crime & Corruption Commission Review

Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the recent invitation to make a submission to the current Parliamentary Crime & Corruption Committee Review of the Crime & Corruption Commission.

I would like to make a submission in relation to the place of mediation in the police complaints process in Queensland.

Attached is a recent article that reviewed the place of mediation in police complaints management Australia wide and in New Zealand. The paper shows that a successful mediation pilot project was conducted in Queensland in the early-1990s but that the mediation option was then replaced by a conciliation process. The paper reviews evidence which indicates that mediation is an excellent way to reduce grievances against police, and that many police officers find benefits in participating in mediation. The paper also outlines how mediation can contribute to a wider program of successful police conduct management.

It would be good to see the Crime & Corruption Commission work with the Queensland Police Service to bring back mediation as a priority option for responding to complaints against police.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Regards

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## Police Practice and Research

### An International Journal

ISSN: 1561-4263 (Print) 1477-271X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gppr20>

# Alternative dispute resolution and mediation of complaints against police in Australia and New Zealand

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To cite this article: Mary Riley, Tim Prenzler & Nadine McKillop (2018): Alternative dispute resolution and mediation of complaints against police in Australia and New Zealand, Police Practice and Research, DOI: [10.1080/15614263.2018.1500284](https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1500284)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1500284>



Published online: 27 Jul 2018.



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ARTICLE



## Alternative dispute resolution and mediation of complaints against police in Australia and New Zealand

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### ABSTRACT

This study assessed the role of alternative dispute resolution options in the complaints management systems of the eight policing jurisdictions in Australia and the single jurisdiction of New Zealand. The available literature shows that a large proportion of complainants would like to participate in mediation, and that both complainants and police who experience mediation report much higher rates of satisfaction than those experiencing traditional adversarial investigative and adjudicative processes. Experiences with informal dispute resolution or 'conciliation' options are more mixed, and they are susceptible to tokenism and misuse as a convenient administrative means of disposing of complaints. Despite this situation, the data obtained from police and oversight agency sources in this study showed that options were limited to informal resolution conducted by senior officers, with an ostensible focus on behavioral improvement but with no meaningful publicly available data on outcomes. The paper concludes by advocating for a best practice complaints management system that includes mediation within a consultative framework focused on behavioral improvement.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 November 2017  
Accepted 2 July 2018

### KEYWORDS

Complaints against police;  
mediation; alternative  
dispute resolution;  
conciliation; informal  
resolution

## Introduction

Police departments in Australia and New Zealand have grappled with complex problems of police misconduct and high volumes of citizen complaints. They have also been the sites of innovation in integrity management, including complaint profiling and early intervention, force minimization training, and civilian oversight – generating large long-term reductions in complaints in some instances (Den Heyer & Beckley, 2013; Porter, Prenzler, & Fleming, 2012; Prenzler & Briody, 2017). Alternative dispute resolution methods for managing complaints have been another area of innovation but with very little available in the way of current information about levels of practice or impacts (cf., Ede & Barnes, 2002; IPCA, 2017b; OPI, 2008). With that in mind, the researchers elected to examine available public record source material in Australia and New Zealand to identify the extent to which reported practices accord with best practices, as identified in the literature, and whether or not there were any policy recommendations to be made from the findings. Given the common problem around the world of police-citizen conflict and large numbers of citizen complaints, the findings should provide lessons for improved practice in other jurisdictions.

## Literature review

Policing is a field of work that attracts large numbers of complaints that require a meaningful response from authorities. In many locations, complaints occur at high and stable or increasing



numbers (Prenzler & Briody, 2017). For example, in England and Wales, complaints averaged 33,000 per annum over the last ten years, with a slight upward trend in recent years (IPCC, 2017, p. 15). In New South Wales, Australia's most populated State, allegations against police have been fairly stable averaging 8,870 per annum over the last five years (NSWP, 2016, p. 95). In New Zealand, complaints have trended upwards, from 2,193 in 2013–14 to 2,614 in 2016–17 (IPCA, 2017a, p. 10).

Complaints against police are now widely seen as an important, if imprecise, indicator of police conduct (Hickman, 2006; Prenzler, Mihnjac, & Porter, 2013; Smith, 2013). Surveys show that most complainants are sincere about their grievances, with only a small proportion of allegations likely to be deemed trivial or vexatious. Formal complaints also represent only a small fraction of persons unhappy about an experience with police. In the past, complaints were easily dismissed as lacking objective evidence, but in recent years the availability of CCTV and mobile phone footage has added considerable credence to allegations. In traditional formal investigative complaints systems, substantiation rates were limited to ten percent or less of matters, although some systems with more committed investigative processes increased rates up to 30 and 40 percent (Porter et al., 2012).

Despite possible improvements in complaint substantiation rates, a legalistic focus on evidence and culpability is widely seen as resource intensive and often unproductive (Maguire & Corbett, 1991; Prenzler et al., 2013). Complainants are generally less interested in punishment and more interested in an explanation, apology or commitment that the conduct will not be repeated against other persons. A large proportion of complaints against police are also about less serious matters, such as incivility or rough handling, rather than assaults or corruption that usually require a formal investigation. Consequently, from about the 1980s, a number of police departments introduced alternative dispute resolution options into their complaints systems for more minor matters (Ede & Barnes, 2002; Walker, Archbold, & Herbst, 2002). Interest was buoyed by the successful growth in alternative dispute resolution options, including mediation, in civil and criminal law (Walker et al., 2002). Alternative options for police complaints generally involve either 'informal resolution' (or 'conciliation'), usually involving communication between a senior officer and a complainant, or 'mediation', involving a meeting between the complainant and subject officer managed by an independent mediator.

There are several published studies involving comparative aspects of the informal resolution of complaints against police, with mixed findings. An evaluation of an informal resolution process in Victoria, Australia, found that 72% of complainants rated the experience as unsatisfactory compared to 39% of police; although only 33% of police were satisfied (OPI, 2008, p. 47 & 50). In the United Kingdom, an evaluation of 'local resolution' programs in the Cleveland and West Mercia Forces found that 41% of complainants were satisfied and 51% dissatisfied, with 27% of police satisfied and 54% dissatisfied (May, Hough, Herrington, & Warburton, 2007, p. 23). However, an earlier study in the UK, across three unnamed forces, found that 57% of complainants were satisfied with informal resolution compared to 10% in a formal investigation group (Maguire & Corbett, 1991, p. 59).

Two studies conducted in Queensland, Australia, included both complainants and police, and compared both informal and formal response to complaints, with largely positive results. An evaluation of a pilot program found that 76% of complainants expressed satisfaction with informal resolution compared to 40% who experienced a formal investigative process (CJC, 1994, p. 60). Complainants in the informal resolution sample said they were kept better informed, and they felt they had a better opportunity to express their views. Police were even more satisfied with informal resolution: 83% compared to 76% subject to a formal investigation (p. 76). Officers who experienced informal resolution were also less stressed – 45% – than those who experienced a formal investigation: 70% (p. 75). A follow-up study of the post-pilot program found slightly lower rates of satisfaction amongst both parties, and recommended better training of police officers conducting informal resolution and reduced pressure on complainants to accept police decisions on outcomes (CJC, 1996; see also Ede & Barnes, 2002). The second study also found that informal resolution was much cheaper and quicker than formal investigations.



In these studies of informal resolution, complainant dissatisfaction related to a variety of factors including lack of communication, lack of an apology and police control of the process; with mediation presenting as an obvious means of addressing these deficits. In the Victorian study of informal resolution cited above, 51% of respondents stated that they 'would have liked to have had contact with the (police) member' (OPI, 2008, p. 47). Maguire and Corbett found that 53% of complainants who experienced informal resolution would have preferred mediation (1991, p. 85). The second study in Queensland reported that 'half of the complainants would have appreciated a face-to-face meeting' (CJC, 1996; p. 21; see also PONI, 2005; p. 29).

Police dissatisfaction with informal resolution in the above studies was largely related to alleged bias in favour of the complainant, triviality of complaints, delays and lack of communication. In the May et al. study, the officers involved who were dissatisfied felt they had not been able to explain their side of the issue effectively (May et al., 2007, p. 21). A focus group study of New York City police officers subject to complaint investigations found 'the overwhelming majority' expressed a preference for a 'face-to-face interaction' with the complainant (Sviridoff & McElroy, 1989). The reasons included the ability to counter false and malicious complaints. Maguire and Corbett reported that 40% of officers in their study would have agreed to participate in mediation (1991, p. 85).

There are three studies on mediation that compare complainant and police experiences, and also compare mediation, formal investigations and informal resolution – all showing positive results for both parties from mediation. In New York City, Bartels and Silverman (2005) surveyed complainants who either met with the officer concerned in the presence of a 'trained, neutral mediator' or had their complaint processed through a standard investigation (p. 621). Both processes were managed by the Civilian Complaint Review Board. Eighty-one percent of complainants 'felt that the real issues of their complaint were discussed in their mediation session', compared with 32% in the regular investigation group; and 73% of the mediation group felt they 'had a "say" in the complaint disposition', compared to 32% in the non-mediation group (p. 627). Ninety-three percent of officers participating in mediation agreed that the 'real issues were brought out' through mediation, and 87% felt they had a say in the outcome, although responses from the investigation group of officers were too small to be included.

In the United Kingdom, Young, Hoyle, Cooper, and Hill (2005) compared complainants' perceptions of informal resolution conducted in the Hampshire Police with 'restorative' processes involving 'a face-to-face meeting between complainant(s) and police officers(s) in the presence of a trained facilitator', carried out in the Thames Valley Police (p. 285). In most cases the facilitator was a police officer. In a few cases, complainants objected to police officers as facilitators and an external person was engaged. Sixty-one percent of complainants were satisfied with the restorative session, compared with 33% of the informal resolution sample. Twenty-eight percent of complainants in the restorative group were dissatisfied, compared to 45% of those in the informal resolution group (Young et al., 2005, p. 303). Overall, 85% of police in the restorative group were satisfied and 5% were dissatisfied, whereas 69% of the conciliation group were satisfied and 15% were dissatisfied.

Finally, a study in Denver showed very high levels of satisfaction with mediation amongst both parties, with sessions conducted by 'an independent mediation vendor' (Schaible, De Angelis, Wolf, & Rosenthal, 2012, p. 633). Seventy-nine percent of complainants were satisfied with the mediation process in contrast to 11% of the 'non-mediation' sample. Sixty-three percent of complainants experiencing mediation were satisfied with the outcome, while only 7% of the non-mediation group were satisfied. Ninety-two percent of the mediation group felt the process was fair, compared to 12% of the non-mediation group. For police, 81% were satisfied with mediation, in contrast to 12% in the non-mediation sample; and 73% were satisfied with the outcome compared to 49% with non-mediated cases. Ninety-six percent of police in the mediation group thought the process was fair, compared to 46% in the non-mediation group.



Alternative dispute resolution is primarily intended to be a more effective means of resolving a grievance than adversarial processes. In the area of police complaints it is also intended to improve officer conduct and police-community relations. Unfortunately, there do not appear to be any published studies comparing complaints against individual officers before and after formal investigations and informal resolution and/or mediation. One of the studies cited above found that complainants in the informal resolution sample had better views of police as a result of mediation than those experiencing a formal investigation, and that formal investigations had an adverse impact on complainants' views of police (CJC, 1994, p. 65). At the same time, the follow up study drew attention to a problem with officers attracting repeat complaints going back through the informal resolution process without any apparent behavioral benefit (CJC, 1996, p. 16). The Young et al. (2005) study found that none of the police who experienced conciliation felt they had learnt anything that would directly affect their behavior, whereas 30% in the restorative sample indicated they had learnt something from the complainant that might make them more careful about how they related to members of the public in the future – generally in terms of being more sympathetic (p. 300). In the first Queensland study, 83% of the officers conducting informal resolution thought that the process would help change officers' behavior, in part because the non-disciplinary approach allowed officers to be more open to guidance (CJC, 1994, p. 93).

Overall, the available literature provides strong support for a best practice model of police complaints management that includes both informal resolution and mediation options, but with mediation most likely to produce optimal outcomes in terms of reconciliation. At the same time, there is a risk that alternative dispute resolution processes simply palliate the adverse effects of inappropriate police conduct, and alternative options need to be more systematically integrated with other means of behavioral improvement.

## Method

As noted in the introductory section, Australian and New Zealand police departments have been innovators in complaints management, including in alternative dispute resolution. The primary aim of the present study therefore was to assess the extent to which alternative methods have been implemented with reference to a best practice framework that prioritizes mediation over informal resolution, as described in the literature review. A secondary aim was to assess how well police departments and oversight agencies report on the use of alternative dispute resolution practices, including the publication of throughput data and outcomes.

The approach to this study is based on the assumption that police accountability requires transparency and that modern police departments should report on key integrity strategies and outcomes in their annual reports or at their websites. The absence of information suggests either that police are not engaging in a practice that should be considered standard, or are not reporting on it and therefore are deficient in accountability. The same applies to police oversight agencies, many of which have been involved in driving and reviewing alternative dispute resolution options (e.g. CJC, 1994, 1996; PONI, 2005). With this in mind, the researchers conducted searches of the annual reports for all police departments and police oversight agencies in Australia and New Zealand. This amounted to nine police departments and 16 oversight agencies. The large majority of police departments were oversighted by both an anti-corruption (or 'integrity') commission, dealing with serious matters, and an Ombudsman, dealing with intermediate and lower level matters. Three years of annual reports were accessed from agency websites covering the period 2014–15 to 2016–17. The collected reports were analyzed using keyword searches including 'alternative dispute resolution', 'complaint resolution', 'mediation', 'conciliation', 'local resolution', 'managerial resolution', 'complaints', 'allegations', 'outcomes' and 'dispositions'.

In addition, the websites for all the agencies were searched for further information, including descriptions of complaints processes and reports on complaints management and alternative dispute resolution processes. Finally, keyword combinations were used to search the legislation



database Austlii.edu.au to identify legal authorities for alternative dispute resolution of complaints against police. The systematic searches described above constituted an audit of public record source material covering recent practices. In addition, references to relevant earlier sources, such as inquiries or reviews, were pursued and the reports were accessed and analyzed for any explanatory background material. Some of the secondary sources identified in the literature review, above, were also used in this part of the study. The findings section below integrates all this material to provide contemporary and historical accounts of the place of alternative dispute resolution and mediation options in police complaints processes in each jurisdiction.

## Findings

### *Australian Federal Police*

Complaint management processes in the Australian Federal Police are based on the 2002–03 'Fisher Review' of integrity management (Prenzler & Briody, 2017). The review was instigated in response to a variety of problems with the complaints system, including protracted legal cases. Fisher (2003) found that the system was overly reliant on complex and expensive investigative and adversarial processes, and 'reactive punishment' (p. 59). At the time, conciliation was reportedly being used for approximately 30% of complaints. The benefits of this option were described as follows (p. 45):

Conciliations are a clear move away from an adversarial and punitive process to a conflict resolution model which encourages the speedy resolution of concerns. Conciliation also provides some scope to deal constructively with honest mistakes, or minor lapses of conduct, particularly where immaturity, inexperience or unusually difficult situations impact on events. It encourages the development of people management skills and accountability by asking employees to examine their own behaviour or actions. The provision of feedback to complainants enhances and promotes the accountability of supervisors and those taking part in the conciliation process. Communication skills, such as listening, negotiation and empathy, are paramount in this process.

The report recommended greater use of 'motivational management', by boosting the conciliation process to focus on behavioural change (p. 59). There was a recommendation for increased use of conciliation and better training of managers in conciliation.

Reforms emanating from the Fisher Review, introduced in 2006, purportedly gave primacy to 'managerial resolution' at the local level (Fisher, 2003; p. 102; AFP, 2007; p. 116). Conciliation of 'conduct issues' by a 'manager' is available under Division 3 of the Australian Federal Police Act 1979. However, Federal Police annual reports, and the separate annual reports on policing in the Australian Capital Territory, do not contain any information on local or managerial resolution. Similarly, the annual reports of the two oversight bodies – the Commonwealth Ombudsman and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity – shed no light on the process. To-date, there have been no systematic follow-up reviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the revised complaints system.

### *New South Wales*

The NSW Police complaints system has been influenced by the large-scale Wood Commission of Inquiry, which ran from 1995 to 1997 and found enormous problems of entrenched and diverse types of misconduct. Public complaints had been managed largely in-house through a simplistic and highly deficient investigative model. An existing complaint conciliation process was condemned by Wood as 'a form of damage control' that failed to address behavioral problems and sometimes simply provided an opportunity for police to pressure complainants to withdraw their complaints (Wood, 1997, p. 321). The Wood Commission report noted that a number of submissions had recommended other forms of alternative dispute resolution, including one

**Table 1.** Complaint Dispositions, Informal Resolution, NSW Police, 2014–15–2016–17.

	2014–15	2015–16	2016–17
Finalized complaints	3,635	3,240	4,078
'Resolved by police through informal resolution and oversight by us'	1,213 (33%)	1,017 (31%)	765 (19%)

Source: Adapted from NSW Ombudsman, 2017, p. 93.

supporting 'conferencing' (p. 323). However, the idea was dismissed out of hand without explanation in favor of supposed improvements to the conciliation system. These amounted to little more than local Commander control, and the admissibility of statements made in the conciliation process in possible further disciplinary actions (p. 347). It appears that some form of managerial resolution has remained in operation in NSW, but with almost no information on the public record. The Police Act 1990 states that 'a person conducting an investigation may attempt to resolve a misconduct matter (being a complaint) by means of alternative dispute management procedures' (s. 135(4)). The 2014–15 police annual report stated that:

The NSW Police Force endeavors to resolve complaints quickly and efficiently. We have streamlined our complaints system and introduced informal processes to help resolve minor matters quickly. This reporting year more than 88% of complaints against police officers were either declined or resolved without formal investigation. We continue to focus on the release of complaint information in accordance with procedural fairness and government policy and our management systems emphasize remedial approaches to managing the conduct of police officers (NSWP, 2015, p. 93).

Despite the claim to transparency, the report contained no data on the outcomes of the 8,578 allegations that year, including the results of 'informal processes'. There was also no evidence of improved conduct.

The police oversight agency the Police Integrity Commission published nothing in its reports related to alternative dispute resolution. According to the 2016–17 annual report of the NSW Ombudsman, 'a managerial model of complaint handling' is at 'the heart of the design of the police complaints system' (NSW Ombudsman, 2017, p. 92). However, the focus appeared to be much less on any kind of 'resolution' involving the complainant and much more – ostensibly at least – on local commander remediation of conduct issues entailed in the complaint (p. 92). Typical interventions included 'official warning notices, increased supervision, coaching, counseling and restricted duties' (p. 94). The Ombudsman's annual report for 2016–17 contained disposition data for complaints against police, managed by the Ombudsman. Table 1 shows that informal resolution cases conducted by police decreased from one-third of finalized complaints in 2014–15 to 19% in 2016–17. No information was provided on types of cases nor participant experiences.

## Victoria

Victoria Police annual reports contain very little information about the complaints process. The 2016–17 annual report referred to a 'Management Intervention Model (MIM) and Local Management Resolution (LMR)' but without any link to alternative dispute resolution options (Victoria Police, 2017, p. 93). The report did include some case disposition data for three years, with one matter 'conciliated' in 2015–16 and three in 2014–15 (p. 94). Annual reports by the oversight agency, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC), provide slightly greater detail but shed little light on the full array of dispositions, especially alternative dispute resolution.

Some light was shed on the absence of action in this area in a special IBAC report *Audit of Victoria Police Complaints Handling Systems at a Regional Level* published in 2016. The report did not identify any specific event that triggered the audit, but the introduction to the report indicated it may have



been related to ongoing allegations of police biases and delays in complaint investigations. The IBAC report noted that police had an option to 'conciliate' complaints under the Victoria Police Act 2013 (s. 170), and that the Commissioner is required to notify the IBAC of such cases and report the outcomes. The report also referred to what appeared to be an internal document containing guidelines for resolving complaints through the Management Intervention Model, including 'conciliation and mediation' (in IBAC, 2016, p. 57). The audit found five cases where 'conciliation' was initiated, but no outcomes were recorded and the IBAC was not notified (IBAC, 2016, p. 58). There did not appear to be any cases of attempted mediation. The report supported the greater use of conciliation in the following terms, while staying silent on mediation (IBAC, 2016, p. 58):

As highlighted in Victoria Police's MIM policy, conciliation is a constructive means of resolving disputes. It provides an opportunity for all parties to express their concerns and perspectives, improve their understanding of the other parties' points of view and ideally, reach a mutually acceptable resolution. Successful conciliation can prevent the escalation of complaints... The audit results suggest that conciliation is under utilized as a means of resolving suitable complaints at the regional level.

## Tasmania

The Tasmania Police employed a 'Graduated Management Model (GMM)' of complaint processing during the three years covered by the present audit (DPFEM, 2017, p. 23). This involved a division between more serious Class 2 matters processed centrally by the Professional Standards Command, and less serious Class 1 matters 'usually handled at a regional level' (Integrity Commission, 2016, p. 3). The 2016–17 police annual report included plans to replace the GMM with a new system called Abacus. The change was in response to a 2014 review of the GMM by the police and oversight agency, the Integrity Commission, which reportedly found that 'although the GMM made progress in meeting some of the needs of modern policing, there were areas where improvements could be made such as opportunities to reduce over-investigation of minor matters and to generally improve business process outcomes' (DPFEM, 2016, p. 34). The differences between the two systems were unclear at the time of completion of the present study, although it appeared that Abacus would include a wider range of conduct indicators, including drug and alcohol testing (DPFEM, 2017, p. 23).

The Tasmanian Integrity Commission does not appear to have an alternative dispute resolution power (Integrity Commission Act 2009). However, the Police Service Act 2003 empowers the Police Commissioner to resolve a matter by conciliation 'at any time during an investigation of a complaint' (s. 47). Conciliation is primarily an option for the less serious Class 1 matters. A police officer will investigate a Class 1 matter 'unless the complainant and subject officer(s) are receptive to "conciliation". Conciliation alleviates the need for an investigation or a determination on whether the Code of Conduct has been breached' (Integrity Commission, 2015, p. 8). There is limited information available on the conciliation process. Tasmania Police do not publish any complaints data in their annual reports. The Integrity Commission conducts an annual audit of police management of complaints and provides a report. In the most recently available report, for 2015, 3% of 37 sustained 'misconduct allegations' were 'conciliated' (Integrity Commission, 2016, p. 7), with no further information available. No other references were made to mediation nor to any other form of alternative dispute resolution.

Of significance is an earlier audit of conciliated complaints conducted in 2013 by the Integrity Commission (2014). The report noted that conciliation generally entails 'an apology, direction, guidance, training and mentoring', and that both the complainant and subject officer need to agree to the process (2014, p. 34). It was noted that all 15 complainants whose complaint was conciliated and audited had agreed to this approach. In addition, 'the Commission was impressed with the conciliation process from the complainant's perspective, and considers that Tasmania Police performed well in this area' (p. 34). It noted, however, that five of the officers involved were

not consulted, and not even aware that the process had occurred or the outcome, and that this needed to be rectified in the future. The report also included an example of an 'appropriately conciliated complaint' that both satisfied the complainant and addressed the future behavior of the officers involved (Integrity Commission, 2014, p. 35):

A Class 1 complaint of incivility was made against two officers who had parked in the complainant's designated parking spot. The resolving officer in this complaint first spoke to the complainant and obtained advice on the terms under which the complainant would be willing to conciliate the complaint. The resolving officer then spoke to the officers about each of the areas the complainant had listed, at the same time obtaining their agreement to conciliate the complaint. The complainant was contacted again and informed that the officers had been spoken to about the listed matters, and the conciliation was finalized. Thus, the complainant was happy that their concerns had been heard, and the officers had both received a development outcome which would improve their future conduct not only a benefit to them and the community, but also the organization... (the complaint) was finalized in 17 days well within the 28 day timeframe set for Class 1 complaints.

### South Australia

The South Australian Police (Complaints and Disciplinary Proceedings) Act 1985 empowers the Police Commissioner to attempt to conciliate complaints, subject to the Police Ombudsman's agreement (s. 22). The Act does not mention mediation. The Ombudsman can also initiate conciliation. In the three-year period covered by the present audit, SAPOL was oversighted by the Independent Commissioner Against Corruption and the Office of the Police Ombudsman. The Commission's annual reports contained nothing of relevance to the study. The Ombudsman's report for 2016–17 included data on conciliations for three years as a proportion of all complaints. Table 2 shows that between 45% and 51% of closed complaints were subject to conciliation. The report noted that 29% of conciliations were 'unsuccessful', but there were no definitions for this nor for 'successful' mediation (Police Ombudsman, 2017, p. 14). It was also not clear if the conciliations were conducted by the Police or the Ombudsman; and there was also no link between conciliation and other outcomes recorded, including 'informal advice', 'recorded advice', 'managerial advice', 'apology' and 'training' (p. 14).

### Western Australia

Western Australia Police annual reports contain almost no information on complaints. Some data have been available in a periodic *Professional Standards Statistical Overview*. The 2015 report referred to 'Local Complaint Resolution (LCR)', described as 'a process of resolving complaints and issues by reconciliation. This method is now encouraged for many issues that formerly were subject of full inquiry processes, for faster complaint handling and more efficient use of resources' (WAPOL, 2015, p. 4). In 2014–15, 165 public complaints against police were dealt with by this means, amounting to 15% of 1,087 complaints. A different format without this information was used in 2016, and a 2017 edition was not available when the present study was completed in March 2018.

The WA Corruption and Crime Commission's annual reports contained nothing on alternative dispute resolution processes. The WA Ombudsman, on the other hand, had a 'Complaints

**Table 2.** Total Complaints and Conciliated Complaints, SAPOL 2014 15 2016 17.

	2014 15	2015 16	2016 17
Complaints received	1,116	996	858
Complaints closed (includes carry overs from previous years)	1,105	1,274	934
Complaints conciliated (% of closed complaints)	562(51%)	574(45%)	421(45%)

Source: Adapted from Police Ombudsman, 2017, pp. 13 & 14.



Resolution Team' that promoted the 'early' use of informal resolution as a 'timely' and 'inexpensive' means of dealing with 'systematic issues and creating improvements in public administration' (Ombudsman WA, 2016, pp. 17 & 152; see Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1971 s. 19.1a). In 2015–16, the Ombudsman finalized 126 complaints against police, and 160 in 2016–17, but with no data on informal resolution (Ombudsman WA, 2016; p. 231, 2017; p. 231). Nothing could be found on mediation of complaints against police.

## Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Ombudsman Act 2009 gives the Ombudsman authority to manage a complaint, including complaints against police, by 'conciliation or mediation' (s. 37). The Ombudsman and the Commander of the Police Professional Standards Command consult on the disposition of complaints, although the Ombudsman has an overriding authority on how cases are managed (Ombudsman NT, 2017, p. 70). A three-part classification structure covers two types of more serious complaints and more minor matters directed to a 'Complaint Resolution Process CRP', described as follows in the Ombudsman's report (2017, p. 39):

CRP is an informal process undertaken by Police where early personal contact between Police officers and complainants may lead to a quick and effective resolution. A CRP may involve explaining to a person why a particular course of action was taken, the legal and practical considerations surrounding the incident or a simple apology.

Reference was also made to a separate 'conciliation' process, which appeared to involve more communication between the parties to a complaint, although the report also noted that 'in practice, matters that might be resolved by this process are often dealt with as CRPs' (Ombudsman NT, 2017, p. 41). No mention was made of mediation.

Northern Territory Police annual reports include data covering the three main complaint categories, with breakdown data for more minor matters dealt with by the informal resolution process. The outcomes reported in Table 3 show that the proportion of complaints subject to informal resolution increased from 18% in 2014–15 to 36% in 2016–17. No further data were included, such as participant experience surveys.

The Ombudsman annual reports also include a number of case studies showing how complaints were resolved. The 2015–16 report included one case demonstrating CRP in action in terms of complainant satisfaction and practical problem solving (Ombudsman NT, 2016, p. 47):

An Officer gave a presentation on road and pedestrian safety at a school assembly at the request of the School Principal. The Principal was concerned at several near misses that had occurred near the school and asked the Officer to tell the children something that would get the message through about road safety. The Officer gave a description of a traffic accident which a parent was concerned was too graphic and potentially traumatic given that children of all ages attended the assembly.

**Table 3.** 'Outcomes Complaint Resolution Process', Northern Territory Police, 2014 15 2016 17.

	2014 15	2015 16	2016 17
All complaints	380	340	339
Complaints subject to 'complaint resolution process'	68 (18%)	116 (34%)	121 (36%)
Apology by NTPFES	18	13	10
Complainant satisfied	13	26	44
Brought to attention of member	0	29	4
Remedial advice (CRP)	9	3	6
Remedial advice (administrative)	5	1	2
Apology by member	5	6	4
Reimbursement	1	0	0
No action required	14	29	26
Action or decision by police officer reasonable	3	9	25

Sources: Adapted from NTPFES 2015; pp. 162 & 163; 2016; pp. 174 & 175, 2017; pp. 164 & 165.

A Complaint Resolution Process was undertaken with the agreement of the parent. While the Principal indicated that she had received a number of positive comments from parents about the presentation, she advised that she had written an open letter to parents, apologizing for any distress the presentation may have caused.

Within a short period after the complaint, in response to a suggestion that children might feel scared of Police following the presentation, Police undertook three foot patrols and conducted community liaison during school commencement and completion time and attended the school for basketball with the children during lunchtime. Police undertook to continue to engage with children informally as often as possible. Steps were also undertaken to improve traffic facilities in the vicinity of the school and to increase the awareness of drivers regarding traffic safety around the school.

The complainant accepted the outcome of the Complaint Resolution Process and no further action was required.

## Queensland

The Queensland Police website includes a complaints page that refers to 'conciliation through our local complaint resolution process' as one option for the treatment of complaints (QPS, 2017, p. 1). However, the annual reports and accompanying statistical reviews contained no data on the topic. The annual reports of the oversight agency, the Crime and Corruption Commission (CCC), similarly held nothing of relevance. The Queensland Ombudsman (2017) engages in informal resolution of complaints but it 'does not have the power to investigate complaints about ... the operational actions of police' (p. 3).

The absence of information about alternative dispute resolution and mediation in Queensland is surprising given that the QPS was the site of innovation in this area in the 1990s, immediately after the major Fitzgerald corruption inquiry (1987–89) and the establishment of a new oversight agency – initially called the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC), now the CCC. A trial of informal resolution in 1993 was initiated by the CJC with cooperation from the police (CMC, 2004, pp. 1 & 4). The 1994 and 1996 evaluation reports were summarized in the literature review for the present study, with findings generally on the positive side. Mediation was made available before this, in February 1992, soon after the establishment of the CJC in late-1989. The initiative came from the CJC, with the support and cooperation of the police. The idea apparently derived from the successful introduction of 'community mediation' in Queensland in 1990 for civil matters, managed by the 'Community Justice Program (CJP)' within the Department of Justice.

The police mediation program was run as a six-month pilot and involved 33 sessions. Meetings were managed by 'trained, independent mediators' from the CJP (CJC, 1994, p. ix). According to an unpublished survey of complainants and officers, summarized in the 1992–93 CJC annual report, 'all but one (session) resulted in the parties reaching agreement', majorities of both parties were satisfied, and complainants were more satisfied with mediation than they were with formal investigations (CJC, 1993, p. 59). Finalization of cases was also faster with mediation than an investigation. These outcomes led to the formal adoption of mediation as an ongoing option for complaints. However, the subsequent adoption of informal resolution meant that mediation was eclipsed by referrals to this simpler mechanism. The CJC (1994) reported that 73 complaints had been mediated up to July 1993 when informal resolution was introduced, but only eight mediation sessions had occurred from that time (p. 11). The later 1996 evaluation of informal resolution reported that police preferred informal resolution over mediation because it gave them 'more control', including the opportunity to provide guidance to the subject officer (CJC, 1996, p. 33). The report nonetheless recommended that mediation remain an option, as part of a flexible complaints process, especially where complainants felt particularly aggrieved and/or 'expressed a wish to meet with the subject member' (CJC, 1996, p. vii).



## New Zealand

The police complaints system in New Zealand is reportedly strongly influenced by a reform program following the release in 2007 of the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Police Conduct* (IPCA, 2017b). The Inquiry was prompted by claims of inadequate investigations of sexual assault allegations against police, going back to 1979; and the main finding was that the complaint investigation system over the longer term had been seriously deficient (Commission of Inquiry, 2007). The report noted that the system had been complex, cumbersome, subjective and overly legalistic. Despite this, the report recommended a range of fairly conservative changes to procedures.

At the time of the Commission of Inquiry, police had been operating a form of local conciliation called 'District Complaint Resolution' (Commission of Inquiry, 2007, p. 180; see Independent Police Conduct Authority Act 1988, as at March 2017, s. 18 & 20). Based on very limited evidence, the Commission of Inquiry (2007) described the system as 'an efficient and effective means of resolving a problem arising between a member of the public and the police' (p. 180). Limited to 'non-serious' matters, the process was described in the following terms (p. 180):

Where a complaint is designated as appropriate for District Complaint Resolution it is referred to the district from which it arose for resolution. This will normally involve a senior officer talking with the complainant about their complaint and finding a mutually agreeable method of resolving it. The complainant is subsequently provided with a letter confirming what has been discussed and stating that if they are not satisfied with the result of the complaint they should write to the PCA. If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome, the PCA will review the police file in the same manner as it would any other complaint file.

The Inquiry was told that up to 405 complaints had been managed this way, with 'a failure rate of only about 5%' (in Commission of Inquiry, 2007, p. 181). The report noted that the police did not conduct participant experience surveys; but the Inquiry gave tacit support to the continuation of the system, with no recommendations regarding improvements.

The New Zealand Police annual reports contain very little information on the complaints process. The 2014–15 report referred to an initiative involving the police, the oversight body – the Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA) – and the Government Centre for Dispute Resolution to develop a set of pilot projects around an 'early resolution process for suitable complaint matters' (New Zealand Police, 2015, p. 124). The main aims were described in terms of 'better outcomes for complainants and a reduction in the amount of resource required to resolve matters' (p. 125). There was no apparent particular event that prompted the move, but it appeared as an outgrowth of an ongoing drive, emanating from the Commission of Inquiry, to improve consistency, timeliness and confidence in the complaints system (New Zealand Police, 2015, p. 115). There was no evidence of mediation as a consideration in this process.

The IPCA (2015) described the new process as involving better screening, where matters requiring formal investigation are separated out earlier from those deemed suitable for informal resolution. Three pilots were initiated in 2016 in the counties of Manukau, Eastern and Canterbury, which ran for nine months. An evaluation, published by the IPCA (2017b), concluded that there was sufficient evidence to deem the process 'successful in achieving its goals of bringing lower level complaints against Police to a more timely and efficient resolution', and generating 'more tailored resolutions and reduced stress for complainants and subject police staff' (2017b, p. 15). The report cautioned, however, that the results were not conclusive in that case completion times and participant satisfaction surveys could not be compared to other forms of complaint disposition. A total of 37 questionnaires were completed by complainants and 36 by subject police. Sixty-one percent of complainants were satisfied with time taken to finalization compared to 84% of police. Sixty-five percent of complainants felt their complaint was appropriately dealt with, and 56% thought the outcome was fair. Sixty-seven percent of police thought the process was fair. In terms of outcomes, 40 percent of matters resulted in an 'explanation', and 39 percent in an 'apology'. The survey did not ask whether or not participants would have preferred mediation. Despite the limitations of the evaluation, the 'early resolution process' was rolled out across the nation.



## Discussion

The results of this study of police complaints processes in Australia and New Zealand were extremely disappointing from the perspective of the primary aim of the research: to assess the extent to which mediation was prioritized over informal resolution. In fact, it appeared that most departments simply did not even consider mediation when reviewing their systems. There was evidence, however, that all nine departments made fairly systematic use of alternative dispute resolution by way of informal resolution (or 'conciliation'). The earliest incarnations appear to go back to the 1980s. Since then, informal resolution has evolved in the direction of 'local' or 'managerial' resolution, where a subject officer's line supervisor liaises with complainants from their local area, engaging in forms of explanation and/or apology and, in theory, then focusing on improving the conduct of the officer where appropriate. The findings are summarized in Table 4.

The secondary aim of the study was to assess how well police departments and oversight agencies report on the use of alternative dispute resolution practices, including the publication of throughput data and outcomes. However, as the findings section showed, very little information was available. The two narrative accounts of conciliation cases, from Tasmania and the Northern Territory, showed the potential for the positive resolution of citizen complaints, improved police-community relations and improved police conduct, but this did not translate into any numerical data. The study findings were limited by the method, and it is possible that police have more detailed data that they are not placing on the public record. There is certainly a dearth of recent publicly available formal evaluations of alternative dispute resolution practices. Earlier research in Queensland had shown that an initial pilot of informal resolution in the early-1990s attracted majority support from both complainants and police (CJC, 1994). There was some slippage, however, in a follow up study of the established program (CJC, 1996). Both these studies lacked direct comparisons with a concurrent mediation program. There were some promising indicative results for the mediation program, but it was discontinued. An evaluation of informal resolution in Victoria was extremely negative and provided strong support for mediation (OPI, 2008), but the implications were also ignored. The only other formal evaluation came from the 2016–17 New Zealand pilot of 'early resolution' (IPCA, 2017b).

The Queensland and the New Zealand evaluations of informal resolution recorded complainant satisfaction in the range two-thirds to three-quarters, providing grounds for the programs to be regarded as successful. These numbers are fairly good, especially when contrasted with available satisfaction rates for more formal adversarial systems. However, the mediation studies reviewed in the literature review section showed some complainant satisfaction ratings in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile and even the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile. Higher rates of police satisfaction were also recorded for mediation. The wider literature review also showed that a large component of complainants want the opportunity for mediation.

**Table 4.** Summary Findings, Alternative Dispute Resolution Practices in Australian and New Zealand Police Departments.

	Informal Resolution?	Informal Resolution Terminology	Mediation?
Australian Federal Police	✓	'Conciliation', 'Managerial Resolution'	X
New South Wales	✓	'Informal Resolution', 'Alternative Dispute Management', 'Managerial Model'	X
Victoria	✓	'Conciliation', 'Local Management Resolution'	X
Tasmania	✓	'Conciliation'	X
South Australia	✓	'Conciliation'	X
Western Australia	✓	'Local Complaint Resolution'	X
Northern Territory	✓	'Conciliation', 'Complaint Resolution Process'	X
Queensland	✓	'Conciliation', 'Local Complaint Resolution'	X
New Zealand	✓	'Early Resolution Process'	X



Why is mediation not an option in police complaints systems in Australia and New Zealand? The present study identified a common failure by police and oversight agencies to engage with the scientific literature, undertake local research and adopt evidence-based practices in this area. More specifically, the available evidence suggested that informal resolution, or local resolution, is cheaper and more convenient for police. This was revealed in part through descriptions of informal resolution as a means to 'reduce over-investigation of minor matters and to generally improve business process outcomes' (DPFEM, 2016, p. 34), and 'encouraged for many issues that formerly were subject of full inquiry processes, for faster complaint handling and more efficient use of resources' (WAPOL, 2015, p. 4). However, while informal resolution might suit some complainants, for those denied mediation it substantially reduces their capacity to communicate with the officer concerned. There was also no evidence that 'local' or 'managerial' resolution helped improve police conduct – as claimed. Taking all this into account, informal resolution appears to serve largely as a convenient mechanism for police management to be seen to be responding creatively to complaints while simply generating a 'bureaucratic suppression of a dispute' (Young et al., 2005, p. 300).

This cynical interpretation of informal dispute resolution is challenged somewhat by the earlier Queensland finding that police managers felt that mediation prevented them from engaging in guidance of officers (CJC, 1996). However, this is based on a narrow 'no fault' view of mediation. Victim-offender mediation for criminal cases shows that mediation can be operationalised with variable degrees of culpability attributed to the accused person (Hayes, 2007). Mediation of complaints against police can be a flexible process that includes behavior management. Of particular note here is the successful police complaint reduction programs outlined in the literature review. These programs utilise early intervention systems that profile officers and units based on complaints and other conduct indicators, and generate tailor-made interventions. They also modify standards and procedures based on complaint pattern analysis (Prenzler & Briody, 2017).

What all this indicates quite clearly is that mediation should be one component of a complex and robust police integrity management system, and not a component confined to 'minor' complaints. The current best practice model for police complaints management asserts that complainants should be consulted about how they want their matter processed (Prenzler et al., 2013). This does not mean that authorities should give complainants total discretion over the disposition of their matter. Consideration has to be given to the nature and seriousness of each allegation; and to the likely benefits to complainants, the subject officers and the public from different dispositions. Nonetheless, canvassing and respecting the wishes of complainants and subject officers, and maintaining timely communication, is likely to be most effective in generating appropriate responses that optimise understanding and healing for both parties – while also contributing to better policing in the long run. Additional support for this approach is garnered from the 'procedural justice' literature, which shows that support for, and cooperation with police, is best achieved by activation of the principles of 'neutrality', 'respect', 'trust' and 'voice' (Tyler, 2008; p. 30; Hinds & Murphy, 2007).

Given this evidence, it can be said confidently that a state-of-the-art complaints and discipline system must have mediation available and should encourage mediation as the likely best option for many complaints. The evidence is variable about who can conduct mediation. Nonetheless, the engagement of mediators external to police is probably ideal. This could involve specialist staff in an oversight agency or a government or private sector mediation agency. A regionalised, public sector-wide, integrity commission would provide a good means of service provision were mediation to be adopted on a large scale. The wider literature on police complaints shows clearly that a large majority of the public and complainants expect allegations to be investigated and adjudicated by an independent agency (Prenzler et al., 2013). Mediation, almost by definition, satisfies this criterion with face-to-face meetings managed by an independent chairperson.

## Conclusion

This study of alternative dispute resolution processes for complaints against police in Australia and New Zealand found that all agencies processed a proportion of matters through informal resolution. It was claimed in a number of instances that 'local resolution' or 'managerial resolution' was focused on behavioral improvements. However, no evidence was presented to validate this claim, and informal resolution appeared as a largely tokenistic means of disposing of minor complaints quickly and cheaply. There would seem to be a place for a well-managed informal resolution option in a model police complaints system, especially where either party to a complaint is not willing to participate in mediation. At the same time, mediation would appear to be the more desirable default option for restorative responses, especially where it is attached to other methods for improving police conduct and reducing complaints. Globally, policing remains a highly fraught occupation, with variable but often high levels of public dissatisfaction reflected in large numbers of complaints (Hickman, 2006; IPCC, 2017; Prenzler & Briody, 2017). The evidence base regarding the outcomes of different complaint dispositions, including alternative dispute resolution, needs further development with a focus on best practice methods.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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