In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (http://aussa.anu.edu.au/). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor ‘About AuSSA’.

Do We Trust Big Business?

Associate Professor Carol A Tilt
School of Commerce, Flinders University

There is some apparent scepticism of big business among our community according to the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) undertaken in 2005. In the survey 73% of South Australians and over 75% of the respondents in the national survey feel that big business goes unpunished when they break the law (down slightly from 81% in 2003). 61% of Australians (and 61% of South Australians) consider that ‘ordinary people’ do not get a fair share of the nation’s wealth.

The sections below cite statistics from the SA sample, and compare the results with the national sample where appropriate. In terms of their involvement with companies or business, less than half of the respondents of the national sample owned shares in an Australian company, slightly fewer than did in 2003. Just under 38% of South Australians own shares, with only 4.5% owning shares in more than ten companies. Just over half those in the sample were employed during the week they were asked to respond to the survey.

Corporate Power

Interestingly, most South Australians consider that big business these days should have less power (34%) or a lot less power (22%) than they currently have (see Diagram 1). These figures are not significantly different from the national sample. The number of people nationally suggesting business should have less power has increased since the previous survey undertaken in 2003 when only 14% considered they should have a lot less power. 57% of people (56% of the SA sample) considered that the Federal Government is either entirely or mostly run for a few big interests; this figure has not changed since the 2003 survey. Yet, only around 20% of people in the 2005 survey considered addressing the gap between rich and poor as the first or second most important issue facing Australia today. As can be seen in Diagram 1, there is also little difference in views on this issue between males and females.
It might be suggested that working class people are likely to be more sceptical of big business than middle or upper class, but the survey results suggest this is not the case. There is no statistical difference between upper, middle class and working class responses to this question ($p = 0.280$) for either the national or the SA samples. Due to small numbers in the ‘upper’ class category ($n = 14$) it was combined with the middle class categories, and as can be seen from Diagram 2, in both categories of class, the majority of people in South Australia consider that business should have less power. These results mirror those for the national sample almost exactly.

Diagram 2: Power Big Business Should Have by Social Class (SA Sample)

Public Confidence

In contrast, however, when asked how much confidence they have in major Australian corporations, 43% stated they have a lot or a great deal of confidence, with 52% saying not very much or none. People appear slightly less confident in banks and financial institutions (32% a lot; 66% a little or none). This contrasts with a high level of confidence in charities, 60% stating they have a lot or a great deal of confidence. In the South
Australian sample the results for confidence were not affected by whether a person was employed or not (which includes unemployed, retired and home duties) \((p = 0.358)\). These results can be seen in Diagram 3.

Diagram 3: Confidence in Big Business (SA Sample)

![Diagram 3](image)

This is one area where the results were significantly different between the SA and National samples. When the results of the national sample take into account whether or not the respondents were employed, there does appear to be a difference (Diagram 4). Employed respondents were almost equally split between having quite a lot and not very much confidence, while those not employed had less confidence \((p = 0.002)\). This finding may be influenced by such issues as the higher age level and/or the lower skill level of the unemployed in South Australia, and is an important area for further study.

Diagram 4: Confidence in Big Business (National Sample)

![Diagram 4](image)
Consumer Influence

In terms of how people might try to influence big business, one common form is to use selective consumption. There is some evidence that respondents feel there is tension between consumers and big business, with 59% stating there is a lot or some tension in existence. Similar figures were reported in the national sample (58%) and this is a slight decrease from 2003 when around 68% perceived there to be tension. In 2005, 34% of respondents had used consumer power to exert influence over business, by boycotting products for political, environmental or ethical reasons, in the past 12 months. Another 19% had done so before then and 27% saw it as a legitimate form of influence, saying they might do so even though they have not done so in the past. Again, the figures for SA are indistinguishable from those for the national sample.

It would seem that many people are concerned with the amount of power afforded to big business in our society and confidence in those organisations is not particularly high. They are considered to have too much power, to have too much support from the Federal Government and to receive a disproportionate amount of the nation’s wealth.

All data from this publication is sourced from: