

The death of “TJ” Hickey—the social and economic circumstances

Rick Kelly
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The death of Thomas (“TJ”) Hickey in Sydney last Sunday morning has deeply implicated the New South Wales police, who, either directly or indirectly, played a critical role in the events leading up to the fatal bicycle crash.

The police force has a long established track record of racist and provocative behaviour against the Aboriginal community. Unsurprisingly, Aboriginal residents in the inner-city suburb of Redfern reacted with anger and hostility to police denials of any responsibility for Hickey's death.

While the exact circumstances of the tragedy remain unclear, the premature death of Hickey, who was just 17 years old and the eldest of seven children, demonstrates with perfect clarity the terrible social and economic deprivation affecting an entire generation of Aboriginal youth.

What is presently known is that on Saturday morning, at approximately 11 a.m., Thomas rode his BMX bicycle from his aunt Virginia's home, where he was living, to visit his mother, who had arrived in Sydney on Friday from Walgett, a small town in rural New South Wales.

After seeing his mother, Thomas encountered the police. He then cycled away at high speed. A short time later the boy came off his bicycle at the rear of the high-rise Turanga public housing commission tower. Thomas was impaled through the chest and neck after somehow landing on his back on a blunt metal fence.

The police have denied ever chasing Thomas, although they admit seeing him shortly before the fatal crash. In a press conference held on Sunday, Inspector Bob Emery claimed that Thomas “saw the police and [the] police saw him, but because he wasn't a person of interest to them they continued on their patrols.”

The police, who claim that they were looking for

another Aboriginal youth not fitting Thomas's description, say that they found the terribly injured Thomas after a member of the public flagged down a passing police car. After being taken to Sydney Children's Hospital, Thomas's internal injuries were too severe for doctors to save him, and he died at 1 a.m. Sunday morning. The police described his death as a tragic but freak accident.

At least three witnesses have reportedly come forward to dispute the police version of events. These witnesses claim to have seen the police chasing Thomas Hickey immediately prior to his fall on the fence.

Irrespective of the actual actions of the police, what seems to be beyond dispute is that before his death Thomas was convinced that the cops were chasing him. The youth had an apprehended violence order (AVO) issued against him, and was also wanted on a separate assault charge. Even apart from these circumstances, however, it must be emphasised that for Aboriginal youth in Redfern, attempting to evade the police whenever they are seen approaching is an entirely rational thing to do.

In an environment of extreme poverty and social deprivation, every Aboriginal youth in Redfern has grown up experiencing police harassment and provocation. The Aboriginal community living in what is known as “The Block”, where Sunday's riot occurred, has witnessed repeated violent police raids, as well as daily incidents of racism and intimidation. As a consequence, Aboriginal residents avoid contact with the police whenever possible.

As Thomas's aunt put it, “If you're black and you see a police car you just run.” This reaction would have been instinctive for Thomas Hickey, especially given that, according to his family, police assaulted the boy

only last December, after being picked up for a crime he did not commit.

There are conflicting accounts not only of the events leading up to Thomas's death, but also concerning what happened immediately after. The boy's mother, Gail Hickey, as well as Redfern community leader Lyall Munro, have claimed that witnesses saw the police search through the youth's pockets and call for police backup before they called an ambulance to the scene.

No one should have any confidence that the three inquiries called by NSW Premier Bob Carr will establish a true account of police involvement in Thomas Hickey's death. Carr has already given his backing to the police for their inflammatory tactics in Sunday night's riot, and declared in advance of any investigation that the police retain his full confidence.

What is known about Thomas's life provides some insight into the consequences of the terrible deprivations inflicted upon the Aboriginal people, who form the most oppressed section of the Australian working class.

Hickey was born in "The Block", Redfern, but moved to Walgett with his parents when he was 13 years old. The death of his grandmother, Elizabeth Hickey, affected him deeply, and he soon began to experience trouble with local police. Thomas also developed problems at school, as he struggled with reading and writing.

Different media accounts report Thomas as being involved in different kinds of petty crime, possibly including car theft and bag snatching. Whilst still in Walgett, he reportedly spent some time in juvenile detention, and in a separate incident, had an AVO issued after an assault allegation.

Thomas moved to Sydney last December, staying with his aunt, Virginia Hickey, in the inner-city suburb of Waterloo, adjacent to Redfern. In Sydney, Thomas's impoverished environment led him to continue to engage in occasional petty crimes. But as his uncle, Michael West, told the media, "He wasn't a career thief. He was only stealing for a feed."

Despite his extremely difficult environment, Thomas, with the help of his family, was beginning to turn away from petty crime and planned to return to school to complete his education. Michael West noted that Thomas "just wanted to finish his education and to go

to tech. He knew he was turning 18 and he didn't want to end up in the 'big house'—the jailhouse."

His mother had travelled to Sydney from Walgett for the purpose of resolving his outstanding AVO, through a mediation arrangement. The day before Thomas came off his bicycle, his aunt Virginia had also arranged an appointment with a local youth guidance group to assist his return to school.

After his death, friends and family spoke highly of the deceased youth. His mother, Gail Hickey told the media, "He's a happy-go-lucky boy. Loved playing football, looked after his sisters. He was a friendly boy." These sentiments were repeated by a number of Thomas's friends in Redfern who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Many recalled Thomas's passion for rugby league, explaining that he was a keen supporter of the Parramatta Eels club.

The frustrated life and premature death of Thomas Hickey stands as a damning indictment of successive state and federal governments, who have been both unwilling and unable to provide any solution to the terrible social conditions facing Aboriginal people in Sydney and across Australia.



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