

Australia: teenagers killed in high-speed police chase through working class suburb

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Two teenagers from Macquarie Fields died in a terrible car crash on Friday night as the result of a high-speed police chase through the Sydney south western suburb. Matthew Robertson, 19, and a 17-year-old young man, were killed just before 11 p.m. when the car in which they were travelling slammed into a tree in Eucalyptus Drive, one of Macquarie Fields' main residential streets. The driver of their vehicle escaped from the scene and is now the subject of a police manhunt.

Police officers continued the car chase despite the fact that they knew the identity of the young men, who were allegedly travelling in a stolen car, and could easily have apprehended them later. Police later admitted that the victims were well known to them. The highly-dangerous character of the chase along the narrow, house-lined road was obvious. Residents could easily have been killed. In fact, another car chased by police ploughed into the same tree several weeks ago, seriously injuring the driver.

Outraged local residents and young people were furious that the police had not called off the chase. A crowd of about 70 people, including many friends of the victims, quickly gathered at the scene on Friday night, denouncing the police and clashing with them.

The hostility was fuelled by the refusal of the police to allow the 17-year-old young man's distraught father to see the body of his son in the vehicle. Youth who were involved in the confrontation said police in riot gear pulled guns on the crowd. Police arrested two people at the scene.

Anger mounted throughout the next day, as residents, family friends and young people placed wreaths and cards on the tree and conducted a midday wake and vigil at the site.

On Saturday night, provocative police actions led to a violent confrontation in nearby Rosewood Drive, where young people had lit a bonfire on the road and were conducting a peaceful protest against the deaths. First, police helicopters flew over the suburb, spotlighting people, while about 60 OSG (Police Operations Support Group) officers amassed in the car park of the Glenquarie shopping centre.

Youth then confronted the police, throwing stones and other objects at lines of police. Suddenly, according to residents of Rosewood Drive who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, police wielding shields stormed into the street, hitting people

with batons. Several residents were injured, including at least one who had not been involved in the clashes. Police arrested three more people, charging them with "affray" and assaulting police or "breaching the peace".

Further clashes between police and local residents took place on Sunday night.

Speaking to the media at the Saturday vigil, residents outlined the reasons for their concern and anger. They condemned the police for chasing the young men's Holden Commodore at speeds of up to 140 kilometres an hour, endangering the lives of local residents as well as the teenagers themselves.

They also accused the police, who were in an unmarked car, of deliberately ramming the Commodore off the road and into the tree, which is just outside the front of a house. Witnesses said the police switched police cars to cover-up the cause of the crash.

Matthew Robertson's brother, Aaron, 18, accused the police of causing his brother's death. "The police hit the car and that's why it crashed," he said.

Thomas Kelly, a young friend, told the journalists: "They should have called it off. Look at how narrow the street is. It's no wonder they went into a tree. They were lucky the car didn't go into a house. The coppers hit the car and ran it off the road. They wouldn't let Dylan's dad come to the car and see the body. There's no dignity in Macquarie Fields."

"This sort of thing is happening every day. The cops used to say to us: 'Why don't you steal a car, so we can chase you'. We're all worried about who will be killed next. The cops have it in for all of us. We put up with this from the coppers all the time. They come around our houses every day and harass us. They have no respect for our families or our friends."

Local resident Barbara Perkins told the WSWs that in recent weeks, heavily-armed police have raided the homes of local youth three times, on the pretext of searching for weapons. Armoured vehicles were used, with special operations group officers pointing spotlights, machine guns and laser stun guns at occupants. No weapons were found.

Perkins commented: "Those boys were good boys. Yes, they got into trouble from time to time, but they didn't deserve to die. The coppers wanted them dead. The police harass them all the time."

“Just look at this area. Is it any wonder that kids get into trouble with the police? Look at this park over the road. Can you see a playground? There is nothing for young people in this area.”

Tracy Jenkins from nearby Glenfield came with two of her daughters to pay respects to the dead teenagers. She condemned the police tactics, as well as the deprived conditions and lack of opportunities for young people in the area.

“The police shouldn’t chase in streets like this. They should have gotten off their tail and caught up with them later. They could have prevented these deaths. Chasing youngsters is only going to make things worse, not better.

“I don’t know why the police do this. They need to get people who do wrong, but why keep on pursuing them up a populated street? These boys might have done wrong, but it didn’t need to come to this. This is not fair. Where’s the justice?

“The police have a whole different way of doing things in poor areas. They should catch the real crooks, but the rich just keep on getting richer. People with the money can get away with anything. How many corrupt police have been discovered in the past 10 years, for instance?”

Jenkins explained that her teenage daughter had been unable to find a job for six months, despite completing Year 10 and then graduating with a Business Administration Certificate from the Macquarie Fields TAFE (Technical and Further Education) college. The federal government’s privatised Job Network office at Ingleburn had proven to be no help in finding employment, unlike the now-abolished Commonwealth Employment Service (CES).

When she took her daughter for an interview for a position at a planned Krispy Kreme doughnut outlet in Campbelltown, they found more than 800 young people lined up for a handful of jobs. After waiting two hours, they had to leave to pick up one of her younger daughters from after-school care.

“It’s the same as these young men. They had no future and no money. So they go out and get into trouble, trying to find other ways to get money. We need something for the all the kids around here.”

These comments point to the underlying social roots of the latest tragedy. Macquarie Fields and nearby suburbs such as Minto, Claymore, Airs and Ambervale are among the poorest in Australia. They include large public housing estates where only 30 percent of adults have jobs, and the homes and social facilities are severely run-down after years of funding cuts by state and federal governments.

The schools are seriously under-resourced (James Meehan High School at Macquarie Fields lacks even air-conditioning for most classrooms during the hot summer months), the rail and bus services are woefully inadequate and unreliable and the nearest hospitals, at Liverpool and Campbelltown, are notoriously under-staffed.

Increasingly, the only official response is stepped-up police

harassment and repression, targeted against young people in particular. A report released last November found that 54 people died in police chases during the past decade in the state of New South Wales.

Both the car chase itself, and the subsequent clashes typify the police-state style conditions that have been created in Macquarie Fields and other working class suburbs. Under the guise of fighting “crime”, the police intimidate, humiliate and terrorise entire communities.

This weekend’s events bear a striking resemblance to those in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern just over a year ago. Thomas “TJ” Hickey, 17, an Aboriginal teenager, was killed when he crashed his bicycle while fleeing police vans. When the furious reaction of local people spilled over onto the streets, police squads were sent in, provoking violent clashes outside Redfern railway station.

Just as occurred following the Redfern riot, the state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr has backed the police actions unconditionally and seized upon the violent clashes to vilify and demonise local residents. Carr said he was “disgusted by the behaviour of rioters” in Macquarie Fields.

“I think the police have done a first class and immaculate job in handling difficult circumstances where they’ve arisen, so they’ve got my support and encouragement,” he said. “I feel sorry for the police officers who got involved after what appears to have been a disgraceful physical attack on police.”

Police Superintendent John Sweeney said a coronial inquest would be conducted into the Macquarie Fields deaths. But without waiting for any inquiry, he declared that the police were blameless. He said the car chase had lasted only one minute and ended when the driver lost control of the stolen car after clipping a roadside concrete verge.

His remarks and those of Carr indicate that no confidence can be given to the outcome of any official investigation. During last year’s coronial inquest into “TJ” Hickey’s death, clear evidence emerged of a systematic police cover-up of the circumstances of the youth’s death.

Four witnesses gave evidence that at least one police vehicle was pursuing Hickey moments before his fatal crash. After weeks of denials that they were chasing, or even following, Hickey, police officers admitted that a police vehicle had entered the laneway in which he crashed. Nevertheless, coroner John Abernathy exonerated the police officers, finding that their actions did not “contribute in any way to [TJ’s] death”.



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