

Australia: Report details police attacks on African immigrant youth

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A report commissioned by the Legal Services Board of Victoria, released on March 18, has exposed the constant police harassment and violence endured by African immigrant youth. The 36-page report—titled “Boys, you wanna give me some action? Interventions into policing of racialised communities in Melbourne” and supported by the Fitzroy, Western Suburbs and Monash Legal Services—was based on interviews with eight community workers, one police officer, and 30 young people either born in Africa or in Australia to African parents. The youths’ families are mostly from Somalia and Sudan, but now live in Melbourne suburbs of Flemington, Braybrook, and Dandenong.

African immigrants are among the most oppressed layers of the working class. Provided with grossly inadequate official support when they arrive in Australia, they typically subsist on poverty-level welfare payments or low-wage menial work. African families are concentrated in some of Melbourne’s most impoverished suburbs—Braybrook in the west had an official unemployment rate of 16.4 percent in 2006, Dandenong in the outer south-east had a median individual income of just \$315 a week, while the high-rise public housing flats in Flemington have become a ghetto within the gentrifying inner-west suburb. Young people have few opportunities, with mass youth unemployment and inadequate recreational facilities.

The report detailed extraordinary levels of police surveillance and interference. “[V]iolence, threats and intimidation are not one off incidents but are routine aspects of street policing where particular groups of young people are concerned,” the report noted. “Almost all of the young people we spoke with reported the experience of being stopped and questioned and/or being directed to move on by police *several times in the same day*... Almost all participants in this project reported experiences of violence at the hands of police. Of those that hadn’t, all knew of a friend or family member who had.” [Original emphasis]

The report provided examples of especially brutal acts of violence. One youth described his experience: “They picked me up, they put me in the back of the car. Then they took me to [locality] and all beat the shit out of me, and they left me there.” Another youth was kicked, hit with police torches, and then driven to an isolated location far from his home and abandoned without any money.

The young people interviewed by the report’s authors described being assaulted by off-duty, out-of-uniform police officers. The report detailed one incident in which police unlawfully instructed a group of young men to leave a park where they were socialising by a certain time. Two officers later charged at the group with batons, and the youth fled in the direction of another group of “civilians”. Then, the report explained, “As it turns out the ‘civilians’ were actually police, all of whom were either completely out of uniform or had taken off their police shirts, and were wearing only white singlets. Upon realising this, the group started running in a different direction, however the out-of-uniform police had already grabbed and assaulted a 14-year-old boy.”

The “law and order” campaign waged by the state Labor government of John Brumby has created the conditions for stepped-up police harassment against young people. Labor has passed several draconian laws, including sweeping “move on” and “stop and search” provisions. Legislation enacted last December allows the police commissioner or his appointed delegate to declare “designated areas,” within which police can stop and search anyone, including their possessions and vehicles, without any warrant or grounds for suspicion. Police first used these powers last January when a train station in the working-class western suburb of Footscray was classified a designated area. The state government has also provided police with broad “move on” powers that can be issued against anyone deemed by an officer as likely to “breach the peace”.

Police function as a law unto themselves. The report described how cops routinely make unlawful demands on youth to provide information about themselves or others, to move on from certain areas, and to comply with other directives. If the young people attempt to defend their legal and democratic rights they are then made targets. Officers operate with effective immunity; official complaints of violence and misconduct are typically investigated by the accused cop's colleagues. Of 20 complaints of racism made to the Office of Police Integrity by African youth between 2006 and 2009, 19 were dismissed while the other case remains pending.

The study was highly critical of so-called community policing, based on police "partnerships" with local organisations. Victorian police Multicultural Liaison Officers work with "various community and religious leaders within their region", as well as Youth Resource Officers and New and Emerging Communities Liaison Officers. Many of the youth interviewed for the report "found themselves exposed to increased coercive contact with police as a result of their participation in community policing activities". One person reported being racially harassed by the same cop who had participated in a "relationship building" exercise with him earlier that day. Others were subsequently harassed by police who wanted them to act as informants.

The youth interviewed rejected the claim often advanced in the media that their hostility towards the police is a product of their or their family's previous experience with corrupt police in Africa. Instead, "young people's experiences with police in Australia [are] at the centre of young people's negative attitudes towards police".

The report's authors, and the media coverage of the document's release, largely focussed on the issue of police racism. There is no question that vicious racism pervades the police force. This is in part the product of anti-African scapegoating promoted by both the Labor and Liberal parties in recent years. In 2007, during the last federal election campaign, then Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews accused African immigrants of failing to "integrate" and "adjust into the Australian way of life". This followed the government sharply cutting—with Labor's full support—the proportion of Africans allowed into Australia as part of the annual refugee intake.

The Brumby government has remained silent on the report, leaving Police Commissioner Simon Overland to issue the formal response. He claimed that any police wrongdoing

would be investigated and punished, and also admitted that there were racist officers within the force. Sections of the media have expressed concerns that overseas coverage of police racism in Victoria could harm the multi-billion dollar education market. There has been a sharp decline in the numbers of Indian students following a spate of racist violence and allegations of police indifference. The issue is not going away. According to an Associated Press report last Thursday, about 100 Victorian police are being investigated for circulating emails that Overland said contained "a mix of racist and pornographic and otherwise offensive material".

The issue of police harassment and violence against African youth is primarily bound up with class, not race. The situation described in the Legal Services Board report is little different to that endured by impoverished and working class youth of all races—Arab young people in Melbourne's northern suburb of Broadmeadows, for example, white youth in Sydney's Macquarie Fields, or Aboriginal people throughout the country. Police repression is, in the final analysis, directed against the working class, particularly its most oppressed layers. As the gulf between the wealthy corporate elite and the growing numbers of poor people deepens, police violence and intimidation will be stepped up even further.

The author recommends:

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[15 December 2007]



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