

Book Review

ROB WHITE and CHRISTINE ALDER (eds), *The Police and Young People in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, (1994)

Readers of this journal will surely be familiar with the enormous volume of evidence from almost every Australian state¹ indicating that relationships between police and young people in this country are, in many well documented instances, fraught with violent, and/or racist and/or sexist behaviour on the part of police and a sense of powerlessness on the part of young people. Readers will also be familiar with the increasing occurrence of (cautioning) conferences, organised and run by police, and loosely based on the New Zealand model of Family Group Conferences (FGCs). The latter and the “shaming and reintegration” theories on which they are based, are fully discussed elsewhere.² I merely wish to note the disjunction between constructions of police and young people presented in most accounts of such innovative policing strategies, in which police are described as agents with the potential or actual skills to facilitate “community reintegration”; and the construction of police and young people presented in White and Alder’s collection of essays. An analysis of this disjunction is inappropriate in this review of their book. However, I suggest that the issue is one which calls for urgent consideration, because, as Tait’s chapter considering police statistics about youth and police reveals:

Young people are overwhelmingly presented as “offenders” in police statistics. They are not seen as students, workers, tenants or lovers. This should perhaps occasion no surprise ... But we may learn something about the priorities given to ‘community policing’ or other approaches by examining the assumptions upon which the statistics are based. What is the image of youth they present? Do police have a positive and optimistic view about the young people they come into contact with? ...

Even when annual reports describe police contact with young people in innovative ways, the young people are described in their capacity as future or potential offenders³

While police continue to describe young people with whom they come into contact under any circumstances as “potential offenders”, there seems little hope that police operating innovative programs will do anything other than treat young people as actual or potential offenders. Unfortunately, the relationships between police and young people described and investigated in this book suggest that this may well be the case.

The editors’ overall objective in bringing together this collection of essays is to provide an investigation into the links between policing as a distinct form of social practice, and the specific position of young people economically and socially in Australian soci-

1 Referred to in every chapter of White and Alder’s book.

2 See Alder, C and Wundersitz, J, *Family Conferencing and Juvenile Justice: The Way Forward or Misplaced Optimism?* (1994). The Wagga Wagga “approach” is described in the chapter by James, S P, “Contemporary Programs with Young People” at 217–218. James notes that one of the aspects of this approach which has yet to be examined is “the crucial role of the police in the program, a role which demands a reorientation of traditional law enforcement philosophies with regard to young people”.

3 Tait, D, “Cautions and Appearances” at 69, 70.

ety.⁴ Consequently, contributors do not construct relationships between police and young people as universally negative. Nor do they suggest that there is anything radically new in contemporary accounts of discriminatory or violent behaviour in police relations with and attitudes towards specific groups of young people.⁵ However, those contributors whose chapters move from the general to the particular, to discuss police relations with young women, Aboriginal, and “ethnic” young people,⁶ do suggest that, for these groups of young people, interactions are not only frequently violent but are equally frequently laced with racist and sexist assumptions. They also argue that the violent behaviour and the discriminatory assumptions can and should be seen in their historical perspective. It is apparent from these contributions that, for these young people, already structurally disadvantaged, there is scant hope of redressing inequalities and inequities in their relationships with police (including contact through “innovative” cautioning/conferencing practices) without a recognition and understanding of historically developed police constructions of race, class and gender stereotypes.

In concluding her valuable review of the scant but growing body of research on the policing of young women, which reveals the interaction of a “complex set of factors” which persistently result in violence towards and harassment of young women, particularly Aboriginal young women, Alder warns,

... it is ... apparent that simply attempting to change police attitudes through education (the policy most frequently recommended) will not be sufficient to alter young women’s experiences of policing. As Reiner is cited as arguing, “cop culture ... both reflects and perpetuates the power differentials within the social structure it polices. The police officer is a microcosmic mediator for the relations of power in a society”.⁷

Nor will positive changes in police attitudes towards young people be achieved merely through the adoption of “community policing” strategies, as Janet Chan’s chapter on the policing of marginal ethnic youth (whom she identifies as those labelled as “street kids”, “youth gangs” or “known criminals”) ably demonstrates. She concludes

... while racial prejudice and ethnic stereotyping may be a factor, the more problematic area is the police’s perception of their work, particularly in relation to juveniles. ... [T]he tension and problems between police and marginal ethnic youth cannot be solved simply by initiatives such as the use of interpreters, the recruitment of ethnic officers, cross-cultural training of police officers and improved community relations. ... [U]nless young people, including the troublesome ones, are included in the police’s definition of “community”, unless police are prepared to see the upholding of due process as beneficial rather than damaging to their work, and unless changes in police values permeate throughout the organisation, community policing must be seen as the beginning of a long and uncertain process towards positive change.⁸

Chris Cunneen, in concluding a thorough and disturbing discussion of relationships between Aboriginal young people and police, necessarily goes further than Chan in arguing

4 Introduction at 1.

5 See Finnane, M, “Larrikins, Delinquents and Cops” which addresses the “continuities in the policing of young people”, which he suggests are only briefly disrupted by focussing on constructions of young people as “larrikins” or “juvenile delinquents” in “moments of crisis or transition in cultural or social history” (page 7).

6 The chapters by Alder, Cunneen and Chan.

7 Alder, C, “The policing of young women” at 172.

8 Chan, J, “Policing Youth in ‘Ethnic’ Communities”, at 196.

for the possibilities of positive change. He maintains that a fuller recognition must be given to the role played by colonialism in structuring these relations. He concludes

Just as we must acknowledge that colonialism has structured the relations between Aboriginal people and police, so too we should see that, ultimately self-determination and sovereignty will be critical forces in deconstructing the oppressive relations imposed by the state. ...

Self-determination implies the right to establish and control indigenous justice systems, including policing and juvenile justice. More than any other policing options, it offers a long-term and just mechanism to establishing a non-oppressive relationship between Aboriginal young people and police.⁹

A review of this length can hardly do justice to the breadth and depth of this book. The contributions in each chapter form a generally coherent and often disturbing picture of the "main issues at the core of the policing of young people today".¹⁰ The inclusion of gender issues in almost every chapter is a refreshing change from much of the earlier work on juvenile justice issues. The constant deconstruction of the notion of "community" which runs across many of the chapters challenges trite responses to the problems revealed. Kate Warner's chapter provides a useful overview of the legal framework within which police relations with young people are situated, although she emphasises that the legal framework must not be viewed in isolation. In harmony with the conclusions made by other contributors, Warner cautions against a reliance on legislation alone to achieve legislatively mandated children's rights. As Ian O'Connor demonstrates, any suggestion that young people "enjoy a broad range of legal, social and welfare rights" is a myth. He concludes: "In reality, in their encounters with the police and criminal justice system, young people enjoy few rights. The facade of rights is the screen behind which the real business of policing young people is able to proceed unhindered".¹¹

This book is a welcome and crucial addition to the growing number of publications about juvenile justice issues published in Australia over recent years.¹² It is gratifying to finally have such a lively body of sophisticated, critical work analysing theories, policies and practices in the policing of young people in all Australian jurisdictions. And all in a single volume.

Jenny Barga

Lecturer, Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales

9 Cunneen, C, "Enforcing Genocide? Aboriginal Young People and the Police" at 154, 155.

10 Introduction at 6.

11 O'Connor, I, "Young People and Their Rights" at 99.

12 See, for recent examples Carrington, K, *Offending Girls: Sex Youth and Justice* (1993), and Gale, F, Naffine, N and Wundersitz, J, *Juvenile Justice: Debating the Issues* (1993).