

## *When 'Zero Tolerance' Looks Like Racial Intolerance: 'Lebanese Youth Gangs', Discrimination and Resistance*

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I agree with Michael Antrum's comment (1998:200) that, 'Zero tolerance, age and race discrimination is not intelligent policing'. He proposes that a more rational course in dealing with youth crime would be to ask 'young people themselves what might work', and how they can help to diminish crime. Nowhere is the counter-productiveness of 'in your face' police patrolling more obvious, nowhere is the need for community consultation with youth more pressing, than in the Canterbury-Bankstown area of western Sydney following last year's moral panic about 'ethnic gangs' (Poynting et al 1998). In this comment, I will focus on just one contradiction: that between inducing resistance and resentment in ethnic communities by a 'zero tolerance' blitz, and demanding assistance from the same communities in investigating crime.

At a recent public meeting called by the Ethnic Communities' Council of New South Wales with Police Commissioner Peter Ryan, the Commissioner reiterated that one of the greatest difficulties faced by the Police Service in its relations with ethnic communities is the 'unwillingness of community members to come forward and report crime' (Ryan 1999). This complaint is not new, but it has been too little tested empirically in relation to specific communities in critical sites. Nor, to the extent that it may be accurate, have the commonsense explanations offered been sufficiently corroborated to be useful for informing policy and practice.

One of the explanations offered by Commissioner Ryan was that there was widespread fear of the police in many ethnic communities, because of cultural memories of (presumably improper, corrupt and/or violent) practices of police in their countries of origin. This superficial understanding, while doubtless containing a grain of truth, systematically distorts and oversimplifies the social reality, diverting attention from other causal factors and deeper explanations. As David Dixon (1998:2) argues, it 'should provide the beginning rather than the end of an attempt to understand'. Dixon provides a trenchant critique of this ideology, based on extensive empirical work among the Indo-Chinese community around Cabramatta in south-west Sydney (Dixon 1998:2-5). Maher et al (1997) found that young South East Asian immigrants in fact had much higher expectations of probity, equity and justness of law enforcement in this country and were disappointed when these did not match the reality of their experience.

Such questions now urgently need thorough empirical investigation in relation to the Arabic-speaking community of the Canterbury-Bankstown area. Certainly, in relation to last October's killing of teenager Edward Lee in Punchbowl and the gunshots fired on the Lakemba Police Station in November, the media reported police complaints of a community 'wall of silence' in relation to the offences (Bearup 1998; Kennedy 1998; Poynting et al 1998; Trute & Stevenson 1998). The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, 'Senior police admit they don't know whether fear or loyalty is motivating the silence' (Kennedy 1998:1). A further question needs to be asked in each case. If fear is the motive, is it fear of 'ethnic gangs' or is it fear of the police, exacerbated by high profile 'get tough' campaigns? If the motive is loyalty, is ethnic solidarity against the pressure 'to come forward and report crime' actually strengthened by police 'zero tolerance' tactics?

The Monday after the weekend of the stabbing of Edward Lee, police were reporting an apparent 'reluctance to come forward' with information. 'Concealing a murder was a serious offence', warned the area commander (Clennell & Kennedy 1998:3). The next day, the superintendent was attributing this to cultural factors: 'the reluctance of ethnic groups to talk to police' (Temple & Trute 1998:5). The following day he nominated 'barriers of language and cultural differences' as the reason. As state MP for Lakemba, Kevin Stewart, had said, 'there is intense pressure on the Arabic community to deliver something positive' in relation to information about the above crimes (Jackson et al 1998:5). Premier Bob Carr, after publicly blaming 'Lebanese gangs' (Jackson et al 1998:5), summoned Lebanese leaders to a meeting to urge them yet again 'to give greater assistance to the police following the Lakemba incident'. He received the retort from Maan Abdallah, of the Lebanese Community Council, that, 'We don't need any reminding from Mr Carr. We already know our citizenship duty' (*The Australian* 1998:1).

Certainly, there were differences in the local Lebanese community over the issue (Tabar et al 1998). Yet, to the extent that there was resistance to the pleas for the Arabic-speaking community to come forward and assist police, this needs to be interrogated in relation to the methods used by police in dealing with this community, especially its young men.

In what was enthusiastically publicised as a 'zero tolerance' initiative, 'about 130 police, including mounted and dog squad officers, blitzed the Bankstown area in an aggressive and high-profile push to reclaim the streets' (Rowlands & Ogg 1998:9). The objective of this offensive was 'the lookout for stolen property, outstanding warrants, truancies from schools, anti-social and offensive behaviour' (Rowlands & Ogg 1998:9). Radio 2KY reported that 200 people were searched and 6 knives confiscated (30/10/98). The Bankstown local newspaper, *The Torch*, also publicised police briefings that 'the operation netted 46 cautions, 199 separate marches and 247 move-alongs' (*The Torch* 1998:7). The *Daily Telegraph* quoted 'community leader', Sheikh Khalil Chami, 'This is just about all people are talking about on Arabic radio – that police were unjustifiably stopping and searching anyone of Middle-Eastern appearance' (Ogg & Casey 1998:4-5). The same was reported by youth and community workers at the 'Ethnicity and Crime Under the Microscope: Dispelling the Myths' Forum of the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW, Sydney, on 2 November. The *Daily Telegraph* reported some such incidents in detail. Seven young men in a Bankstown street are ordered 'up against the wall', manhandled and searched by six police officers.

A crowd gathers... to watch, the young men test the will of the police.

'Move now,' shouts Senior Constable John Micallef.

'Don't touch me', a young man responds with a contemptuous glare.

Another youth shouts: 'Don't push me, man, what are you picking on me for', as a mate in the crowd demands to know what the officers are doing.

The police win – the search is conducted and yields nothing, but names and details are recorded (Trute 1998)... two dozen police sweep through the [Bankstown] station's bus stop, literally getting in the faces of protesting youths gathered there.

At 4:40pm a teenage boy is arrested by two female constables after murmuring a profanity.

Then at 4:50pm a man carrying a VCR is taken away, his partner screaming in protest, waving what appeared to be a receipt (Ogg 1998).

Labor MP for Lakemba, Tony Stewart, a supporter of the 'zero tolerance' approach (Harris et al 1998), said of the young people of the area, 'They're very apprehensive. They don't trust the police and they don't want to be part of some bureaucratic solution'

(Humphries 1998). This media reportage suggests that, among the Lebanese community in Western Sydney, the fear of police which is troubling the Commissioner may indeed emanate from closer to home than memories of policing in migrants' countries of origin. There is a need for research in the community concerned to test this conjecture. There is more than fear, at issue, however. Canterbury City Councillor and Lebanese community leader, Michael Hawatt, said, 'All we're doing is pushing [young people] in the corner and picking on them. It's creating a bit of animosity and problems within the particular community...' (Murphy 1998). A former detective told *The Australian* that, under the 'zero tolerance' regime,

As a policeman, you have no choice. You go out and you put them up against a wall and you search them and it looks like you have declared war on the community and they declare war back...

If you go in there and treat them like shit, you get a very violent response. If you go in and treat them with respect, you may not get what you want but you don't get a violent response (Fife-Yeomans 1998).

Certainly, the Premier, the Police Commissioner and Islamic religious leaders all canvassed in public statements the possibility that the shooting attack on Lakemba Police station had been a response to the police crack-down in the streets of Lakemba and Bankstown targeted at Lebanese youth, following the killing of Edward Lee. From the responses in tabloids and talk-back radio, this blitz appeared to be quite useful for politicians in terms of garnering votes in the New South Wales pre-election law and order auction. As a means of controlling a purported outbreak of 'ethnic youth' violence, however, it could not have been better designed to provoke the disorder it sought to remedy. A friendship group of male teenagers in Bankstown, misrepresented by the *Daily Telegraph* as an 'ethnic gang', 'say their Lebanese blood [the reporter's word, not the kids] unites them, driven together by persecution and insults suffered by their families. "First of all, we're not racists," a gang leader said today.'

If you insult one of us, then you insult our brother, and if you insult our brother, you insult our father, our mother, and put shame on our whole family.

Respect us, and we'll respect you (Casey & Ogg 1998:4).

An ethnographic study of high school-aged Lebanese background young men of this region has shown that the youths consciously adopt a strategy of withdrawing respect from, and even confrontation with, authorities perceived as discriminatory. This is a way of recreating a feeling of manly dignity in the face of what they experience as racist humiliation (Poynting et al 1999). This has obvious consequences for the 'in your face' style of policing described above, which demand to be investigated empirically, from both sides of the confrontation.

Chris Cunneen and Mary Spiers (1995:274) advocated four years ago in a report to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on people of non-English speaking backgrounds:

There must continue to be monitoring of ethnic groups to establish who is at most risk of racism and discrimination, the most disadvantaged before the legal system, or the most likely to be indirectly discriminated against through existing laws, rules and procedures. This type of approach has fundamental policy implications in, for example, trying to remedy apparent police targeting of 'Asian' youth ...

There is now an urgent need for such monitoring to be undertaken in respect of the Arabic-speaking communities, most notably the currently critical site of Canterbury-Bankstown.

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