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To cite this article: Adam Booker (17 Oct 2024): Telling the untold: First Nations people's perceptions of policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, Current Issues in Criminal Justice, DOI: [10.1080/10345329.2024.2410588](https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2024.2410588)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2024.2410588>



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Published online: 17 Oct 2024.



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Telling the untold: First Nations people's perceptions of policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways First Nations people perceive targeted policing practices in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, New South Wales. It focuses on First Nations viewpoints and perspectives to unveil the colonial legacies of the region, their infusion into contemporary policing practice, and the pressures those legacies exert on the community. The empirical material was generated through interviews with 19 First Nations community members, in collaboration with a First Nations advisory panel. By centring First Nations perceptions of policing, it contributes to critical colonial critiques and decolonising expertise of policing, focusing on subtle and perverse acts of policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, and how these are perceived by First Nations people on different structural, social and personal levels. The main argument is that instances of targeted policing are perpetrated against the collective community through methods of pressure and surveillance. This collective pressure specifically targets and alienates the First Nations community while maintaining a non-Indigenous social order. In doing so, police present a legitimate form of targeted policing that impacts community wellbeing in perverse and ongoing ways. This argument and approach enrich place-specific understandings of First Nations experiences of policing and unmask the dynamic aspects of policing that the community endures.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 March 2024
Accepted 25 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Policing; targeted policing; surveillance; First Nations; decolonial research

Introduction

Critiques of targeted policing strategies emphasise how they tend to result in a disproportionate number of people from marginalised groups being engaged by police. For example, recent data from the New South Wales (NSW) Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research show that in the last decade, the number of First Nations people charged by police in NSW has increased by more than 67% (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics & Research (BOCSAR), 2023; Cormack, 2020), notwithstanding falling crime rates across NSW (see NSW BOCSAR, 2022). In response scholars have described the affective

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and everyday harms targeted policing causes, and its role in the production of such data (see, e.g., Blagg & Anthony, 2019a; Porter, 2016). More specifically, leading Indigenous scholars have presented sophisticated understandings of interpersonal, systemic and structural racism as it pervades policing practice (Cruickshank & McKinnon, 2023; Foley, 2011; McKinnon, 2019; Porter, 2016). This article builds on these and other works by examining how First Nations communities in two regional towns in Australia, view the impacts of targeted policing.

The empirical material was generated through interviews with 19 First Nations community members, in collaboration with a First Nations advisory panel. The article's central argument is that targeted policing is perpetrated against the collective community through methods of pressure and surveillance. This collective pressure specifically targets and alienates the First Nations community, while maintaining a non-Indigenous social order. The argument made in this article decolonises colonial narratives that present policing in settler colonies as impartial and responsive only to incidents of crime (Blagg & Anthony, 2019a; Porter, 2016). Yet more than this, it offers insights into the ways targeted policing is frequently experienced in a collective way by the communities in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, NSW. This is a crucial shift, as nonviolent methods¹ of policing conceal discriminatory policing practices at the same time as sustaining criminalised narratives regarding First Nations people.

Scholarly exploration of targeted policing is not new (Chilvers & Weatherburn, 2001; Dreher, 2006; Sentas & Pandolfini, 2017). In illustrating power asymmetries between police and First Nations communities, leading Indigenous and critical colonial scholars have long sought to outline examples of racist over-policing (see, e.g., Cruickshank & McKinnon, 2023; Foley, 2011; Gilbert, 1988; McKinnon, 2019; Porter, 2016; Watego, 2021; Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023). This field of scholarship can broadly be defined as critical research that interrogates the reproduction of settler colonial power relations between the state and Indigenous people (Veracini, 2010). Such work is interdisciplinary, drawing together postcolonial, settler-colonial and decolonial work (Brown & Schept, 2017; Carey & Silverstein, 2020; Kauanui, 2016; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 1994). One of its principal aims is to better understand the ways First Nations communities make sense of colonial policing practices and how, in doing so, they resist police (see, e.g., Blagg, 2008; Blagg & Anthony, 2019b; Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Porter, 2018, 2019). A foundational aspect of this is its intention to reorganise policing institutions, such that axes of power reproducing First Nations subordination are dismantled.

To do so, critical colonial works foreground the conceptual foundations of settler colonial studies. That is, they incorporate Wolfe's (2006) analytic of colonialism in Australia, as a 'project of elimination' driven by not only race but also by control of land. Wolfe argues that colonialism in Australia is an ongoing structure, not an event. In doing so, he challenges the capacity of postcolonial and other frameworks to fully

¹Note that participants distinguished physical violence from non-physical violence as they discussed changing policing strategies across the region. This article relies on that distinction; however, I note that community members may experience non-physical policing as equally violent or more violent than physical policing, as has been observed in several domestic and international studies. For example, in Australia see Cunneen (2001); Sentas and Pandolfini (2017); Foley (2011); McKinnon (2019); and internationally, Kramer and Remster (2022); Ward (2015); Fassin (2013). It should also be noted that this article prioritises literature that explores Australian First Nations experiences of policing. It does so while also acknowledging the rich body of international literature considering similar themes and policing strategies in international settings.

account for Australia's ongoing experience of colonialism. By engaging with Wolfe, critical colonial frames provide generative conceptual scope for interrogating structural processes and unspoken schemas that are not revealed by abstract conceptual inquiry (Cunneen & Rowe, 2014; Veracini, 2011). In Australia, such limitations take on great significance, particularly when one considers how structural colonial influences, mediated through First Nations relationships to land and other cultural practices, have been exploited as a site for arbitrary state intervention.

Most relevantly for this article, critical colonial scholarship illuminates the structural schemas that continue to reproduce colonial relations between police and First Nations people. This includes their impacts on policing methods and deliberate police misuse of colonial power relations. In pursuing that conceptual objective, such work explores how discriminatory policing practices are validated and legitimised. In doing Indigenous scholars and activists like Gary Foley (2011), Crystal McKinnon (2019) and Amanda Porter (2016) have produced broader conceptualisations of the role of race, gender and class in such settings. This body of scholarship is important for this article, as it provides a conceptual understanding of how settler colonialism and racism are intimately bound up with policing in Australia. This article builds on those works and others, to explore how targeted policing characterised by layered racism and settler colonial structures is being practised in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, NSW.

Accordingly, this article seeks to generate new theoretical insights into contemporary policing methods and the harm they inflict on First Nations communities in regional Australia. First Nations peoples involved in this project described policing as an attack on collective efforts to socialise and communicate, such as sporting days, community barbecues and community meetings. Participants also linked the impacts of targeted policing to police uniforms, police visibility, police disruption of place and police policy. Yet participants also felt isolated by collective policing pressure, in that it was a constant in their lives that extended as far as their dinner tables, disrupting family connections and kinship ties. In that sense, targeted policing was perceived as not only being *everywhere* in a spatial sense but felt *constant* in a temporal sense. By unpacking participants' insights, this article extends critical colonial research that investigates the dynamics of targeted policing and its impact on First Nations communities in remote settings (Blagg & Anthony, 2019a, 'Conclusions'; Porter, 2016, p. 558). In doing so, it bolsters critiques of targeted policing by substantiating the ways that 'harassment, intimidation, assumed criminality [and] over-surveillance' (Porter, 2016, p. 558; for more detailed analysis of the impacts of state surveillance on Indigenous youth in Alice Springs, Australia, see Chapman, 2022) manifest in practice.

The remainder of this article is divided into five main sections. The first analyses targeted policing, discussing its history, key dynamics and the need for further scholarly research that interrogates it. The second section discusses the methods used in this study and the settings in which it was conducted. The third section focuses on how targeted policing of First Nations people has shifted from forms of physical intervention to more subtle forms of domination. The fourth section describes how First Nations peoples experience targeted policing, while the final section unpacks the harm that it causes. The empirical examples discussed across these sections demonstrate how targeted policing is frequently experienced in a collective way against the community. This is a crucial shift

for the First Nations communities engaged in this project, as less physically violent policing conceals discriminatory policing practices and reinforces criminalised narratives that dominate the identities of First Nations communities. The final section draws together this article's main findings and considers their significance for decolonial research about targeted policing, and ongoing colonial power asymmetries.

Theorising targeted policing

It is important to note that targeted policing has perpetrated significant harm on First Nations communities since colonial settlement (Foley, 2011; McKinnon, 2019). Leading Indigenous scholars have shown that such harm includes but is not limited to geographical exclusion, exclusion from social processes and infrastructure, lack of access to social, legal and economic resources, experiences of arbitrary and violent over-policing, racialised policing and the impacts of protection legislation and stolen generation processes as enforced by police (Finnane, 1994; McKinnon, 2019; Sperim, 2022).

This article builds on those and other analyses of targeted policing strategies, to explore their contemporary manifestation in First Nations communities in Broken Hill and Wilcannia. Across each region, contemporary policing strategies were perceived by participants as being linked to proactive policing measures. These are a modality of policing that have long been practised against First Nations communities but took on new dynamics and greater momentum in NSW during the 1990s (Braga, 2007; Dixon, 2005; NSW Attorney General, 2018; NSW Government, 2019; Sentas & Pandolfini, 2017; Sherman & Weisburd, 1995). They were prioritised by the NSW Police Force as a response to the 'New York Miracle' (Dixon, 1998), the abrupt decrease in rates of crime across New York during the mid-1990s, ostensibly achieved on the back of proactive strategies. In broad terms, proactive policing can be seen as an orientation towards policing duties that attempts to mitigate and prevent crime (Dixon, 1998). It includes a suite of measures, such as community engagement initiatives, that are intended to build trust and cohesion. This is in contrast to policing methods that focus on individuals, rights-based policing and reactive responses to crime. Many proactive measures necessitate police spending more time 'on the ground' and thus increasing their visibility (NSW Attorney General, 2018).

While enticing in theory, leading Indigenous scholars have shown how proactive policing strategies like 'high-visibility policing', are threaded with colonial power dynamics (see, e.g., Dixon, 2005; Foley, 2011; Hasisi et al., 2020; McKinnon, 2019; Porter, 2016; Sentas & McMahon, 2014; Svensson & Saharso, 2015). For example, Foley (2011) has written powerfully and protested the impacts of targeted policing and state-sanctioned racism since the 1970s. More recently McKinnon (2019) has articulated how 'racialised policing practices target and enact state-sanctioned violence upon Aboriginal communities'. In the early 1990s, criminologists such as Cunneen and Chan also highlighted racist, biased and violent policing of First Nations people (see, e.g., Chan, 1996, 1992, 1995; Cunneen, 1991; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). Cunneen's and Chan's work built on leading Indigenous scholarship (e.g., Gilbert, 1988; Langton, 1994; Rigney, 1999) to develop an understanding of what targeted policing of First Nations people looked like in specific urban settings. They argue that policing was often arbitrarily physical and racially motivated (see, e.g., Cunneen, 1991).

In addition to his work on the over-policing of Indigenous communities in urban settings, Cunneen has also produced crucial scholarship consulting Indigenous experiences of nonviolent policing, including strategies like surveillance and legislative regulation of life by the state, as well as police mobilisation in large numbers relative to population in western NSW towns (Cunneen, 2001). It is through these works that Cunneen has been able to unveil colonial policing strategies that characterise assimilationist policing practice as well as contemporary policing strategies. Such inquiry has disrupted dominant understandings of police as neutral actors in community settings (Cunneen, 2001), a conceptualisation that has otherwise permeated mainstream media reporting of police (see Chan, 1996; Cunneen & Rowe, 2014). As a consequence, scholars argue that targeted policing threaded with proactive methodologies results in, and legitimises, forms of over-policing that disproportionately target marginalised social groups, and especially First Nations peoples (see, e.g., Bastable & Sentas, 2016; Porter, 2016; Sentas & McMahon, 2014).

Nevertheless, proactive policing has continued to inform policing strategy in NSW (Dixon, 2005). As identified by many critical colonial and criminological scholars, NSW has combined such policies with legislation and reform that broaden police discretion (Bastable & Sentas, 2016; Sentas & McMahon, 2014). Scholars have observed this process with alarm. Sentas and others, for instance, describe the legislative broadening of police powers as a ‘formalisation of proactive policing’, noting that the combined force of proactive policies that prioritise surveillance of Indigenous communities, and expanding discretion means police have a largely unfettered power to surveil and engage people while street policing (Bastable & Sentas, 2016; Sentas & McMahon, 2014). Bastable and Sentas (2016, p. 16) argue that such legislative discretion undermines ‘principles of diverting Indigenous youth from unnecessary police contact and the criminal justice system, resulting in over policing’. Other critical scholars have interpreted the impact more broadly as ‘the pursuit of the government strategy of integrated crime prevention and suppression as more a project of attempting to “manage” urban Indigenous people than serve their interests’ (Dobchuk-Land, 2017, p. 405).

Such critique of proactive policing strategies builds a crucial platform for this article, as it presents in-practice examples of targeted policing that incorporates surveillance and pressure as methods by which police can disrupt Indigenous relationships and everyday life. This work is crucial because the field has yet to develop a robust understanding of what harmful, targeted policing strategies look like in practice, especially in remote Australian settings (see discussion in Cunneen, 2001). Instead and with some important exceptions where studies have focused on the impacts of targeted policing, they have tended to focus on interventionist violence against Indigenous communities and the spectacle of arrest; alternatively, place-based research remains focused on one research question or topic – for example, night patrols or traffic offending (Anthony & Blagg, 2012, 2013; Finnane, 1994; Quilter & McNamara, 2013). However, there has been an underdeveloped consideration of what targeted contemporary policing looks like in practice for First Nations communities.² It is in this scholarly context that this article builds

²See Yeong (2020) at 1: ‘Focused deterrence, or “pulling levers” police programs typically involve the reallocation of existing police resources toward specific targets (e.g., physical spaces, individuals, gangs, types of crime) where police can get the greatest “bang for their buck”. While there is a considerable body of research supporting the effectiveness of

on important work that has come before it, to critique targeted policing strategies in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, and how those are experienced by the First Nations community.

Situating targeted policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia

Setting

This study was conducted in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, regional towns that are located in far western NSW, Australia. Both regions are lands of Barkindji and/or Wilyakali and/or Paakantyi people (Blainey, 1968; Boog, 1988; Forsyth, 2014, 2018; Forsyth & Gavranovic, 2018; Reeves et al., 2011). Both towns were established following colonial expansion from coastal NSW in the late 1800s (Forsyth, 2018; Forsyth & Gavranovic, 2018). Such was the success of the mining boom and associated settlement in Broken Hill that by 1891 it had grown to be the third-largest location in the NSW colony (Forsyth, 2018), boasting a population of roughly 20,000. Wilcannia also experienced rapid colonial expansion due to its location on the Darling River; it became a major shipping port for central NSW, transporting goods to Adelaide (Forsyth & Gavranovic, 2018), and by 1905 it was the third-largest colonial port in NSW. In consequence, whereas the region had previously been considered inaccessible and remote, by 1910 more than 5000 colonial settlers worked in Wilcannia and serviced daily boats (Forsyth & Gavranovic, 2018).

Today, the majority of the First Nations community in Broken Hill remains tethered to what is commonly described as ‘the Mission’, an area where many First Nations people were forced to live at the beginning of the twentieth century following colonial expansion and the creation of reserves pursuant to protectionist legislation. Crucially, many First Nations people live across large areas of land across the broader region but remain excluded on the ‘rural edge’ (Donnermeyer, 2017) of the colonial townships as a marginalised component of the social fabric, unable to access various resources and social supports.³ As in Broken Hill, the combined impacts of colonial settlement continue to dominate the contemporary demographic identity of Wilcannia. First Nations community members are still subject to exclusionary rates of education and employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). There are extremely limited employment services and very limited legal services for First Nations people, and almost no health services.

Notwithstanding the failing infrastructure and limited employment, legal and health services, crime control mechanisms have proliferated in the region. Wilcannia police station has at least 13 officers as against a population of roughly 400 First Nations people, which equates to one police officer for every 30 First Nations persons, in contrast to the state-wide average of one police officer per every 380–400 persons.⁴ It remains a source of acute tension for community members that so many state resources are allocated to crime control, with almost no regard for the rehabilitation of relationships between community and police. Indeed, many community members in Wilcannia view their contemporary relationship to the region as one of colonial warfare. As

such tactics internationally, we know very little about whether and how such programs work in Australia.’ Yeong cites Braga et al. (2018) as providing an overview of this literature.

³For example, many First Nations support mechanisms are located in the centre of Broken Hill township, including Maari-Ma health, Aboriginal Family and Personal Violence Services, the Aboriginal Legal Service and others.

⁴Based on 2020 figures giving a statewide population of 8.1 million: NSW Government (n.d., 2020, p. 6).

Forsyth and Gavranovic note, 'settler colonialism hangs on grimly at Wilcannia, and, as elsewhere, has not failed to take a toll on the Barkindji' (2018, p. 465).

Method

A crucially important feature of the methodological approach is redistributing leadership between the researcher and participant in a way that undoes research power asymmetries. Bessarab describes decolonised research as 'co-creating' knowledge (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), with the researcher and participant both learners in the process. Such a methodological approach is crucial as Indigenous silence in research settings is often enabled by axes of power skewed in favour of the researcher (see e.g., Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 25; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). The result has been the observation and categorisation of impoverished communities via abstract data sets, theorised within westernised constructions of race, gender and class (Cunneen & Rowe, 2014). Consequently, research outcomes have tended to define, essentialise, label and alienate Indigenous communities as the other (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). As Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) asserts, research is a process usually done *to* Indigenous communities, rather than *with* them. Scholars speak to these problems not only as moral and ethical dilemmas reproducing growing rates of Indigenous harm but also as conceptual and design failings invalidating research outcomes (Moreton-Robinson, 2017). More specifically, Tuck, in reviewing Tuhiwai-Smith's 2012 relaunch of *Decolonising Methodologies*, engages her work to remind those working with Indigenous communities that

[r]esearch has a huge credibility problem in the Indigenous world. It is relentlessly ideological, yet has the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate. Research is how imperialism and colonialism are both regulated and realized; thus it has traditionally benefitted the researcher and the knowledge base of the dominant settler group. (2013, p. 367)

These insights informed the design and style of community engagement and collaboration in this study. Establishing environments that were reflexive, safe and ethical, allowed participants to feel empowered as they narrated their lived experiences and centred ongoing colonial power relations. For example, people felt safe enough to discuss contemporary policing strategies and their characteristics that continue to reproduce First Nations harm. In the absence of deep and ongoing community collaboration, those nuanced realities would have likely been concealed. This is important not only methodologically but also conceptually, because while scholars have produced effective high-level conceptualisation of the impacts of colonialism (Anthony & Blagg, 2013; Porter, 2018), work interrogating its impact in practice remains underdeveloped. For example, Morreira et al. have recently argued 'that while debates on decoloniality and decolonisation have proliferated at a theoretical level, there is a gap between high-level decolonial theory and its practices of implementation' (2020, p. 2).

Additionally, the scholarship above provides important examples of how a project's methodology can contribute to decolonised research design, and, in centring First Nations perspectives and collaboration, can also produce data that informs conceptual understanding of First Nations resistance of police in the region. To date, there is limited scholarly understanding of First Nations perspectives and what they reveal

about policing practice in Broken Hill and Wilcannia. That gap takes on greater significance when one considers how structural colonial influences, mediated through First Nations cultural norms, have been shown to expose First Nations people to arbitrary and interventionist over-policing (Cunneen et al., 2017; Mcara & Mcvie, 2005; Porter, 2016). The absence of qualitative research considering the experience from both sides of the equation, with ‘an attentive eye to what is simultaneously occurring at the levels of structure, culture and emotions’ (Ilan, 2018, p. 686), is a methodological and conceptual gap this article seeks to fill.

Considering the guidance above and prior to going to Broken Hill and Wilcannia, I submitted two ethics applications, one in anticipation of forming and collaborating with a First Nations advisory panel, the other considering the interview and data collection phase. These were heavily influenced by the ethical parameters articulated by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2018a, 2018b) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2020). The NHMRC sets out six ‘core guidelines’ for conducting research with Indigenous communities. These are ‘spirit and integrity, cultural continuity, equity, reciprocity, respect and responsibility’ (NHMRC, 2018a). Both the NHMRC and AIATSIS guidelines speak to ethical and purposeful Indigenous research design. Although each note that Indigenous research will always be context-specific, they demand non-negotiable ethical research practices for projects working with Indigenous communities. These have also been incorporated and applied in practice by national and state agencies undertaking research in Indigenous settings. I had ongoing regard to those ethical guidelines and examples (see also CAVAL and the Indigenous Archives Collective, 2023).

Acknowledging the need for research to undo colonial asymmetry within the academy, this project was guided by a First Nations advisory panel. The panel comprised six First Nations community members, all of whom were from the region. All members identified as Barkindji and/or Wilyakali and/or Paakantyi people. Panel members provided ethical advice as the research developed, especially with respect to reciprocal methodologies. Methodologically, the panel also connected me to community members who became participants in the research. From those connections, I engaged 19 participants. The approach to participant selection also developed organically as the research progressed. For example, each of the 19 participants identified as First Nations of the Barkindji and/or Wilyakali and/or Paakantyi people. Those Nations were described by participants as retaining strong cultural links to the western NSW lands and waterways, specifically the Darling River. In that way, many participants identified as ‘Baaka’ or ‘Paaka’, people from the river. However, participants also reminded me that Barkindji and Wilyakali and Paakantyi drew together smaller culturally distinct groups from across the western NSW region. I was told that those peoples had once lived south of the NSW/Victorian border, and west of the NSW/South Australian border.⁵ There were no implicit or explicit criteria for participants, other than living in the region,

⁵The definition of those boundaries is a result of Native Title claims in the late 1990s prompted by colonial land dispossession and the decision of the Australian High Court in *Mabo v Queensland (No 2)* [1992] HCA 23. In June 2015, following two decades of litigation, the Federal Court determined that the Barkindji and/or Wilyakali nations held native title rights and interests to parts of the lands. While it is the largest claim of its kind in NSW, native title rights and interests were simultaneously determined to be extinguished in the majority of the area: *Barkandji Traditional Owners v Attorney-General of New South Wales* [2015] FCA 604. See also Breen and Coote (2015).

and being over the age of 18 years. Instead, the project sought to explore First Nations perspectives of policing across a broad range of experiences and perceptions of police.

To generate empirical material, I conducted qualitative research in Broken Hill and Wilcannia between 2017 and 2022⁶ using yarning and semi-structured interview methods to gather data (for explanation of yarning methodologies in First Nations research, see Atkinson et al., 2021; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Datta, 2018; Kovach, 2010; Sharmil et al., 2021). Yjindjarbandi scholar Dawn Bessarab, writing with Bridget Ng'andu (2010), advocates yarning methods as promoting cultural security for First Nations people participating in research. The method demands informal conversational dialogue, led by the participant. This includes talking in locations and for periods of time chosen by the participant. One important feature of this approach is redistributing leadership between the researcher and participant in a way that undoes research power asymmetries. Drawing on these techniques, I interviewed 19 adults (12 men and 7 women). Ten of those were recorded and transcribed; nine were not, due to the nature and location of the conversation, the wishes of the participant or both. During or immediately after interviews I made notes and wrote these up at the first opportunity. I also conducted repeat interviews with five of the participants; a number of those interviews were by phone and two were in person. All participants have been de-identified consistent with the preferences of participants and the requirements of the University of Technology Human Research Ethics approval.

Positionality

Given my position as a white male researcher, it is important to connect this article with literature that analyses the positioning of non-Indigenous researchers. Indigenous research methodologies have undergone an international transformation over the past two decades (see, e.g., in New Zealand, Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012; in the USA, Chilisa, 2019; in Canada, McGuire-Adams, 2020; see also Chilisa, 2012). Indigenous scholars have articulated a shift to research designs and conceptualisation oriented around 'engagement of decolonization, privileging Indigenous voices, the utilisation of Indigenous worldviews, and relational accountability' (McGuire-Adams, 2020, abstract). These changes have been wrought to overcome power asymmetries between researchers and Indigenous communities. For example, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith characterises traditional research designs as 'open cast mining' with a 'see take destroy' (2012, 118) ethos. Tuck (2009) argues that colonial approaches have a cumulative effect in that they silence the perspective of the researched community by inscribing the perspectives and viewpoints of the researcher onto the researched.

In Australia, such oppressive and racist research structures have indelible effects. By silencing the perspectives of First Nations people, researchers imbricate harmful colonial narratives upon Indigenous research outcomes, thereby sustaining and reproducing subordination. Writing in the early 1990s, Marcia Langton revealed these sorts of impacts, arguing that 'the easiest and most "natural" form of racism is the act of making the other invisible. Indeed, racism can provide a satisfying comprehension of black identity' (1994, p. 94). In adding understanding to Langton's framework, Lester Rigney writes that

⁶Eighteen months of interviews and follow-ups, with six years of panel contact, as well as informal follow-up conversations with interview participants.

‘research has been responsible for the extraction, storage and control over Indigenous knowledges’ (1999, p. 112).

More recently, scholarship and other First Nations knowledge-producing mediums such as the arts have exhibited the positive impacts of centring First Nations perspectives and engagement. Larissa Behrendt recently articulated the importance of Indigenous narratives as *the* Australian stories. She says there is ‘increasing understanding that Indigenous stories need to be led by Indigenous people, and there is an increasing awareness that the strongest storytelling comes from Indigenous perspective’ (Behrendt, 2021, p. 89). Behrendt also notes that criminal justice storytelling in creative mediums like film and art is often more developed and just as powerful as criminological scholarship in decolonising understandings of Indigenous culture. Similarly, Rigney (1999) has argued that Indigenous people are not content to suffer ‘see take destroy’ approaches to their culture and worldviews, observing that they should control their own knowledge and representation and be the beneficiaries of their stories.

The fundamental and common ground of such analyses is that Indigenous perspectives and leadership need to sit at the forefront of knowledge creation. This is a non-negotiable aspect of research conducted with Indigenous communities, especially by white researchers. Such decolonising insights are important considerations for this research. Considering Battiste’s work, I am also reminded that I must ask myself, ‘How am I related to colonisation and oppression? Who are the people who belong to the colonial culture? Who are the people benefiting from the oppressive systems? Who is privileged by oppressing others?’ (Battiste, 2002, 2007, 2008). In working through these questions it is important to remember that I am a white researcher, and on that basis alone – as well as many others – I enjoy great structural and social privilege relative to the First Nations people who agreed to work with me. This is a starting point for understanding my own positioning.

Targeted proactive policing: from physical intervention to subtle forms of domination

Of the 19 participants asked about policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, 14 described policing as ‘racist’, ‘targeted’, ‘bullying’, ‘deliberate’ or ‘calculated’. Several people substantiated their claims by discussing some of the practical ways policing practice has shifted in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, especially in the last 10 years. The general perception was that harmful targeted policing has moved away from models of violent intervention. Instead, participants now perceive it as a ‘cunning’ and ‘provocative’ model based on methods of proactive and high-visibility policing. This was a change articulated by community members in both towns and is a unique development in the sort of targeted policing methods that First Nations people have experienced. To better understand those perceptions, I spoke with Gary in the Broken Hill Aboriginal Legal Service office. I specifically asked him about targeted policing, which had been a dominant theme in many of our discussions. I hoped to better understand how policing pressure has changed in the region. I asked Gary what targeted policing meant to him. He said:

Mate you saw it here, everyone’s gone through it, goes through it [targeted policing] ... I think actually, it’s probably about pressure, constant pressure mate, always there. People

doing the right thing, wrong thing. Look, I'll put it this way, if you're a blackfulla and you're breathing, you're dealing with cops. Even when they are not there, they're there, and that's their policy of, um, of how they want to do things, their policy of policing.

What was striking about these comments was the way he referred to the presence of targeted policing even in the absence of police. He conveyed the impacts it had on him as ubiquitous, as though he was unable to escape it. Gary emphasised this point as he continued:

[S]ee it's different, isn't it? You thought I was going to tell you they run round walloping us, but that isn't it, and that's what you need to understand when you write this, we need people to know that what police do doesn't look the same, so how we fix it can't look the same, and that's what Justine has been telling you as well. Our first meeting we told you that ...

Gary's perspectives were consistent with other participants' views on targeted policing. Ethan, a First Nations youth support worker in Wilcannia, discussed how he felt policing practice had changed in Wilcannia. His comments suggested that it had shifted from a physical process to one that is less violent but more visceral and omnipresent. He said:

They [the police] are at you in a way I have never kind of been through. They, like it's actually less contact now I think, I haven't watched them go and grab anyone without saying a thing for a while. But it stills feels like it's happening if you know what I mean, it's weird, it's like they are everywhere but they're not, do you get that? For the young fellas here that's the killer, that's like, it's a torture. Like surveillance, you know genuine mate, as if there's a camera in your face every step of the way. And so that is a big part of the problem I think.

Ethan, like Gary, was describing a sort of prevalence or constant pressure that police impose on First Nations communities, conjuring Bentham's, and later Foucault's, notion of the panopticon (for analysis of Bentham's concept as used and developed by Foucault, see Mathiesen, 1997). As in the panopticon, where prisoners are made to feel constantly surveilled by not knowing whether they are in fact being surveilled at all, First Nations community members felt aware of the presence of authority at all times, even though they knew they were not being directly observed at all times (for other examples of such perceptions see Chapman, 2022; Watson, 2009, p. 106).

This is a similar outcome to that reported in other settings, especially when considering the experiences of First Nations women and youth. In Broken Hill and Wilcannia, it is through this sort of constant proactive presence that policing authority becomes internalised and carried with the community, wherever people go, regardless of police numbers or physical presence. Such insights add understanding to productive critical analyses that discuss the ever-present impacts of surveillance-based targeted policing (Bastable & Sentas, 2016, p. 60; Chan, 1992, 1995, 1996; Chan & Cunneen, 2000; Dixon, 2005; Hasisi et al., 2020; Sentas & McMahon, 2014). More specifically, this article's findings build on these critical colonial analyses that have exposed the impacts of surveillance-based policing in Indigenous communities. For example, Bastable and Sentas' critique of the Suspect Target Management Program (STMP) found that the surveillance-based pressure exerted by the strategy caused Indigenous young persons to remain indoors, miss counselling sessions and fail to comply with Koori Court orders (Bastable & Sentas, 2016). Not dissimilarly, here Gary and Ethan describe a contemporary police force that is proactive and highly visible in ways they have never previously

encountered. For them, practices of overt physical intervention have become less common, yet in their place are policing methods that harm communities in pervasive and constant ways, akin to panopticon surveillance.

These participants' views suggest a potent shift in policing style towards increased visibility over the last few decades, particularly the last 10 years. Several participants described police as becoming ever-present, even in the absence of growing police numbers and even as more physical policing methods had become less common (see also see also McCausland & Vivian, 2010). Dave talked about it in the context of sporting days. Participants Catherine and Kristian observed it happening in public spaces such as shopping centres. Others described an enormous increase in police attendance on the Mission or the Mallee. Because of that pressure, some participants said that even when police were not present, the community felt a constant threat. Dan considered how this made him feel 'like we have to constantly think about where we are, the way we are talking and who we are talking to'. Participants believed this was a deliberate move by police, suggesting that police use subtle forms of intimidation to sustain power asymmetries between themselves and the First Nations community. The following section moves to animate specific examples of such asymmetries, as they are perceived and experienced by the First Nations community.

Telling the untold: First Nations people's perceptions of policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia

Some international scholars have observed the multi-modal dynamics of police power, and the impacts of combined violence based and surveillance-based strategies (Fassin, 2013; Kramer & Remster, 2022; Ward, 2015). For example, Kramer and Remster (2022) argue that it is the threat of physical violence in combination with surveillance-based policing strategies that create what they describe as 'slow violence' policing. While this article is focused on Australian literature which addresses First Nations experiences of police, the contemporary turn in policing across Broken Hill and Wilcannia evokes Kramer and Remster's concept of 'slow violence'. Relevantly for this research, Kramer and Remster describe 'slow violence' as an approach to policing that is 'more attritional, dispersed, and hidden' (2022, abstract). They add that this style of policing is 'often unseen, by either being mislabelled as unrelated to policing or unacknowledged because its victims are marginalized people' (44), and note that criminology is often unable or unwilling to critique such harms as they fall outside the field's focus on 'the making of laws, the breaking of laws, and reacting to the breaking of laws' (44). Recently, Australian scholars have highlighted similar yet distinct policing mechanisms in remote Indigenous communities. Blagg and Anthony (2014) have described the destabilising risks of community control in policing contexts, specifically in the context of First Nations people's night patrols in remote Northern Territory communities. In doing so, they argue that police use this source of community empowerment to slowly infiltrate and control communities (2014, p. 104). For them, policing tends to project 'white sovereign power' and inscribe the 'worldview, systems, laws and practices of the coloniser' onto the colonised (106).

The shifts in practice described by participants in Broken Hill and Wilcannia have parallels with this slow violence concept, and those subtle practices described by Blagg

and Anthony. Indeed, Dave reflected such conceptual insights when he offered a harrowing example of police disruption of a community event:

When we organised the last community knockout [football match], Adam, we did what we were asked to right? We booked the oval, spoke with [the] council, and spoke with police. We gave both of them a summary of the day, so the schedule and everything. Took me a week to write. We showed them paperwork that the day was sponsored, that we have insurance, all the technicalities were sorted. The boys love this, brings everyone in, we connect, and settle down. And that day arrives, we've done everything, everything and I rock up, 7am. There are a few of us there to set up, we were going to have some little barbie areas and that, raffle tickets and at the gate there are two police cars, and six cops. Six fucking cops! It's 7am and I asked them what they were doing and they said they had been told to come keep an eye on things. You know, so when everyone arrives, they are walking past these, sorry I'm going to say it, these fucking morons staring them down. Then, to make matters worse, they're out of the cars, standing on the oval the entire day. Never left. And Adam, don't get me wrong, this isn't one-off. Every time, so we can't connect or do the things that are important for us.

Here Dave's insights demonstrate the contemporary shift in policing strategy. Whereas policing of First Nations communities is often critiqued as intermittent and acutely violent, Dave describes a form of constant pressure, targeted at community-based events, designed to promote wellbeing. This bolsters the work by Bastable and Sentas (2016) and Cunneen (2001) that articulates the ever-present impacts of surveillance-based policing. Another alarming aspect that arises is the strategies preoccupation with sanctioned community events, which draw together comparatively large numbers of First Nations people.

Like Dave, Mark described a personal experience of over-policing. He told me about a community barbecue that had been organised near a bridge at a river to celebrate the homecoming of an important community member, who had been in Sydney for some time. On the day he described arriving at about 11am and noticing a police car parked on the bridge. Mark said he thought it was strange as the car was blocking traffic. As he got closer, he noticed that police had gotten out of their car and were speaking to his mate, who was managing a small fire and cooking meat. Mark said:

This is bullshit right, the cops had turned up, cut off traffic, because we had a small barbie cooking. There were less than ten of us there. They reckon the bottom line was, we had an exposed flame, so they told us to put it out and move. You know that's not even the craziest thing about that day, the traffic, like it was a siege. Those two, the same two who told us to fuck off from the river then showed up at the Mallee an hour later and said they were 'following up'.

These examples differ in some ways. For example, Dave described police arbitrarily attending community events. Put simply, police are practising a targeted methodology that explicitly enforces the power asymmetry between themselves and the First Nations community. In contrast, Mark offers an example that demonstrates a more interventionist and disproportionate targeted strategy wherein police not only inexplicably attend but actually intervene in community practices. Such subtle yet crucial contrasts demonstrate the diversity of contemporary targeted policing across the region and illustrate the breadth of the impacts such practices have.

Other participants outlined how these kinds of pressures also affected regular, planned events that engaged police and First Nations peoples. For example, Justine discussed interactions between police and First Nations people at community meetings and how police exerted their influence within them. For her, this was especially perverse, given that these meetings were intended to foster a sense of collaboration and togetherness. Justine said:

Since we started these things 10 or 15 years ago, they [police] show up with a list of about 100 fucking things. This is a meeting where we are meant to be talking about fixing things. Instead, they got their list, and they say, don't do these fucking 100 things and you won't hear from us. But, they basically got breathing and eating on the list. Then when we want to say something back, they say, meeting over.

As with Dave and Mark, Justine describes the police approach as one of discipline and control, or a mechanism of oversight. In that sense, and not unlike Anthony and Blagg's account above, policing seems to have evolved in this region such that it is practised in a targeted and considered way. Here for Dave, Mark, Justine and other participants, targeted policing often orients itself around community events designed to empower, coordinate and uplift people.

Targeted policing at locations designed to be supportive spaces was especially perverse for community. Participants could not comprehend why a regular police presence at a community centre was required and instead observed police actions as targeted policing designed to control community. Lenora articulated these examples in her own way, by telling me that she has never had police at or around the front of workplaces as much as she has in the last two years. She said:

We are an outreach centre. You know, somewhere for mob to come and be safe. We support, provide legal advice, and food but we are more than anything, we are a safe space. In the last little while, we've had police out the front here more than I can count. Sometimes they are helping by bringing people in, but ninety-nine per cent of the time they are just lingering, we wish we could give them a move on direction.

Lenora's comments reveal the ways that police are separating community from safe spaces. Instead of violent physical intervention, or unlawful entry, police rely on visibility. They rely on the colour of their uniform and a constant physical presence to foster tension. This links with the feelings and perspectives of those organising sporting days, in an effort to improve community kinship via a First Nations cultural practice. However, police attendance at these events disrupts their function and purpose and leads instead to increased tensions. These kinds of interventions prompt different ways of thinking about how targeted policing of First Nations people occurs in practice, which build upon important recent scholarly discussion (Bastable & Sentas, 2016; Blagg et al., 2005; Chan, 1995, 1995, 1996, pp. 116–118; Cunneen, 2001; Dixon, 2005; Hasisi et al., 2020; Sentas & McMahon, 2014). The examples discussed here register subtle forms of targeted policing such as non-physical intervention and collective harm, practised in ways that undermine cohesion. This dovetails with crucial work that observes how targeted policing drawn from colonial settlement persists across NSW, as it continues to find new ways of targeting First Nations community members (Bastable & Sentas, 2016; Porter, 2016; Sentas & McMahon, 2014). That argument is developed further below by discussing the impacts of these kinds of practices in more detail.

Rethinking the impacts of targeted policing: from the individual to the community

The examples above demonstrate some of the in-practice characteristics of targeted policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia. This section turns to discuss how those sustain disproportionate impacts on First Nations communities, and in doing so reproduce the colonial histories and accompanying power dynamics of both towns. Participants argued that contemporary policing methods uproot First Nations people's spiritual and cultural links to land and disrupt First Nations community kinship. People described an overwhelming sense of isolation and intimidation. A result was that people would isolate and stay home, instead of coming together in positive kinship-building settings. In relation to the community football day mentioned above, Ben stated:

Why would we go? Mark or Dave puts this stuff together, all the bells and whistles. The CWP [Community Working Party] meetings are all about solidarity, all of us coming together. For most of us mob it's just a day of footy, we love it. But then you know that the way they [police] control us, they'll be there. So that makes you think twice. And you know there'll be heaps of them. And you know they'll have their guns on. And you know they won't talk to anyone. So before you even leave the house you're thinking, fuck, do I really want to do this? Do I want to go through it?

This kind of insight reveals some of the unspoken harms of targeted policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia. Targeted policing methods have established a context wherein community are stressed and anxious before they arrive at events. By fostering that sense of angst, police are able to shape and control people by a combination of provocation, intervention and intimidation. This means they are sometimes able to prevent First Nations people from attending community events, provoke them into a sense of submission if they do attend, or cause a physical conflict that then legitimises what would otherwise be discriminatory intervention. These are outcomes which sit comfortably with the argument made by Bastable and Sentas (2016) concerning the impacts of surveillance-based policing, like the STMP, or Cunneen's (2001) work which observed the continuing influence of assimilationist/protectionist strategies, concerned with the control and discipline of every aspect of Indigenous people's lives.

Another significant outcome of these policing methods is that they undermine trust between police and First Nations peoples. This is especially problematic for the community given that effective and legitimate policing relies on trust (see Sentas & Pandolfini, 2017, p. 44, for discussion). For example, in his discussion of the Brixton riots in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, Dixon observes that 'discretion could only be properly used by police who had good relations with the local community, consulted them, and were (in this limited sense) accountable to them' (1998, p. 100). He goes on to note that, consequently, 'zero tolerance [policing] represents a serious threat to a conception of community policing as founded on close, co-operative relations between police and people. Those targeted by police have to be marginalised as "not part of the community"' (100). More recently, Sentas and Paldolfini have built on this theme in relation to the impacts of STMP. She argues that internal police training which identifies First Nations community members as criminal undermines legitimate policing practice and diminishes trust. Sentas and Pandolfini state that 'this model of policing has great social costs to

young people and their families, and to NSW Police, by potentially harming its relationships with the community and compromising its legitimacy' (2017, p. 38).

A Wilcannia father described the consequences of failed trust in this way:

You also start worrying that the young fellas will get the shits and punch on and if they start the billy, what happens then? I want to take my kids. You know the cops are hungry for it. You end up with the shits before you even get there, and it's so emotional. I feel like a, like a, I'm not a man telling ya. But you go there, almost tears in your eyes. This is a daytime footy round-robin. You are scared, angry, nervous about police, what they could make other mob do, who should I stay away from, crazy, crazy, all led by them being there. I don't know the last time there was a day without them, but I wish they'd give it a try.

Such a visceral example of disruptive policing practice is particularly insidious in the way it acts as a source of constant provocation and challenge to the community. First Nations people perceive these forms of policing as an effort to disrupt community harmony. This Wilcannia resident questions *what* makes it necessary and legitimate for police to undermine community events. Far from realising the mandate of promoting social cohesion, his comments reveal how proactive policing methods tend to disrupt it. These realities shift the balance of power further in favour of police and create a sense of deprivation among the community, as they perceive their lives as a constant fight to against an ever-present adversary.

For Dan, the consequences of contemporary policing manifest in a reproduction of colonial asymmetry, which has long dominated the region.

There's definitely bias towards – or negativity towards Aboriginal people. It's always been there. I say that in a way, Adam, that regardless of whether you're an Aboriginal police officer or not, there's a culture in there that gives them this, what do you call it, discretion, that they feel that they can do whatever they like, and they've run away with that in the last few years. *Sometimes they don't even know they're doing it, they just do it, but they are looking for us.* The government lets them, the people let them, so they do it. No one intervenes, and no one gives a fuck. (Emphasis added)

Dan's insights emphasise how forms of targeted policing reproduce colonial tensions and structures, which in turn undermine social cohesion. This has arguably been legitimised by policing policy that, under the guise of proactive measures ostensibly designed to prevent crime, has led to new and more potent forms of domination and control.

Like Dan, Gary made clear that the type of modern policing draws from the past to practice a constant atmosphere of control. From his perspective, police were spatially and temporally present, such that a sense of constant over-policing coloured his perception.

Its been the same for a long time. It's day after day with the same thing, the same start. You know it's like that movie, can't remember it, [*Groundhog Day*] (laughter) yeh, but I think or hope that when bad things happen they might learn and improve but, ok, or I'll put it like this, the day after seems worse than the day before, it's like they are justified you know in what happened yesterday. Because one of us went to jail, they almost like, it's kind of a double down, if we don't go harder maybe someone will say we shouldn't have done it that way yesterday, does that make sense?

Comments like Gary's reveal that participants consider policing to be creating a system of domination whereby any First Nations attempt to resist and develop sovereignty-

building strategies attracts targeted police attention. This argument bolsters recent studies which have demonstrated that ‘seeing disorder is, at least in part, influenced by enduring biases that associate particular minorities with criminality’ (Sampson et al., 2009, p. 81). The combination of enduring biases, the history of the region and targeted policing methods, is entrenching a reproductive pattern of control that is being manipulated by police, and breaking down trust structures.

Conclusions

This article has illuminated the changing nature and impacts of policing practices in far western NSW on First Nations communities. The empirical material has animated particularly the changing character of targeted policing, the ways that proactive policing legitimates targeted policing, and the divergent harms that these emergent forms of policing have had for First Nations peoples and communities. Drawn together, the empirical material analysed above suggests a shift away from individualised physical interventions towards more subtle, cunning, and provocative practices that work to control First Nations communities. This research shows how surveillance-based policing strategies undermine community confidence and increase community tensions. The main argument has been that new forms of targeted policing methods are directed at communities and not just individuals. This concluding section unpacks the significance of this argument.

One of the main findings of this article concerns how shifts in policing practice are understood and experienced by First Nations peoples. The empirical material points to processes that build on important scholarship considering the impacts of targeted policing strategies, especially surveillance strategies. As conceptualised in those leading works, and by Kramer and Remster (2022) in the United States, policing is effecting a more sustained ‘slow violence’ via its contemporary strategies. This is important as scholarship exploring more subtle day-to-day interactions and how First Nations people experience them remains underdeveloped. This article builds that area of research by noting the move away from physical interventions towards subtle yet potent forms of policing that participants sometimes described as inescapable. This is particularly important given the changing identity of police policy in NSW, and the ever-growing rates of arrest and incarceration of First Nations people.

As identified by Sentas and Pandolfini (2017), the simplest conceptual understanding of effective and legitimate policing is community confidence in the institution. This article has shown how proactive approaches to policing in Broken Hill and Wilcannia produce the exact opposite outcomes of those proposed by the method. Participants indicated that a shift towards proactive policing, which is ostensibly about promoting social cohesion and fostering community wellbeing, has had precisely the opposite impact. Participants reported that, in practice, proactive police methods have meant that First Nations are over-policed and subject to discriminatory practices. The impacts of this are especially perverse in Broken Hill and Wilcannia, where such policing tools are creating a system of domination whereby any First Nations attempt to assert sovereignty, or even improve community wellbeing, attract police attention. Something as innocent and culturally significant as a sporting day is met by a contemporary and changed form of targeted policing. That action creates acute community-wide tension and often results

in conflict. Other participants pointed to how proactive policing policies undermine trust in the community. The significance of this cannot be overstated.

By offering place-based empirical insights into these harms, this article unpacks changing strategies of policing in recent years and illuminates the impacts they have had on First Nations communities. This includes collectively pressuring the wider communities, while simultaneously separating and alienating them from each other. The empirical material points to a set of harms caused by policing practices that might be harder than physical interventions to discredit, but that have impacts that are arguably more potent and perverse. It is a form of policing that undermines community confidence at the same time as it locates First Nations peoples as responsible for what is cast as criminal behaviour.

The analysis developed in this article also lays an important platform for other critical policing studies. It offers a way to critically deconstruct policing of Indigenous persons in settler colonial communities. In particular, qualitative and decolonial modes of research are able to illuminate harms among the community beyond direct interactions with police. They can illustrate, for example, the ways that community members avoid attending events that might otherwise foster a sense of social cohesion and bondedness. Those are events that some participants described as an important feature of First Nations culture in that region. This creates a sense of frustration throughout the community which limits the scope for productive community initiatives among First Nations people. Perhaps most significantly, discussing the harms in more expansive ways sheds light on how these forms of policing impact the community collectively. Unlike more familiar understandings of targeted policing as affecting an individual from a given racial background, participants' insights reveal the ways that emerging forms of over-policing inhibit a sense of trust and cohesion among First Nations people collectively.

Disclosure statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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