

PLACE, RACE AND POLITICS

THE ANATOMY OF A LAW AND ORDER CRISIS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge that we are settler occupiers on unceded Aboriginal land. *Place, Race and Politics* was drafted while the authors were living and working on the lands of the Boon Wurrung/ Bunurong and Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin Nation, the Ngunnawal people of the place now known as Canberra and the Ngarigo people of the Snowy Mountains. We pay respect to Elders past and present and to the cultural knowledge they will carry into the future.

Chapter 3 was co-written with Chloe Keel, Greg Koumouris and Claire Moran. The authors also acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Rebecca Powell, Meg Randolph, Sara Maher, Julia Farrell, Nyayoud Jice and Barry Berih and institutional support from the Federation of South Sudanese Associations in Victoria, Afri-Aus Care, Daughters of Jerusalem and the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

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KEY POINTS SUMMARY

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE FOUNDATIONS OF A LAW AND ORDER CRISIS

One Saturday evening in March 2016, the annual Moomba Festival – a whole-of-community event and feature of Melbourne’s cultural calendar – was disrupted when violence broke out between a crowd of young people and the police. Despite police reports of feuding groups involving young people from a variety of backgrounds the story-hungry media homed in on the so-called Apex gang as the main culprits, and the conflation of ‘Apex’ and ‘Moomba’ took hold in the public mind.

Despite the fact that overall rates of youth offending had been declining, the Moomba events gave rise to what scholars and activists often describe as a ‘moral panic’, which lasted for more than 32 months, and then quickly fizzled out in the wake of Victoria’s 2018 state election. Media narratives about ‘African gangs’ and ‘Apex thugs’ exacted a huge toll on Victoria’s African communities, and the South Sudanese Australian community in particular.

Sudanese/South Sudanese Australians are one of the country’s largest ‘new’ communities from a refugee background and possibly the largest diaspora group in the world. According to the 2016 ABS Census, approximately 25,000 Sudanese/South Sudanese people live in Australia, largely in major Australian cities (90%): Melbourne (31%); Sydney (22%); Perth (13%); and Brisbane (12%).

There is significant evidence that the Sudanese/South Sudanese community has struggled with ‘acculturation stress’ arising from family breakdown, historical trauma, the complexity of transnational identities, ongoing ethnic and political divisions within the diaspora, high levels of unemployment and widespread experiences of racism and exclusion in their new environment.

This book presents a multifaceted analysis of the genesis of the ‘African gangs’ panic by bringing together the findings of multiple empirical research projects conducted, individually and together, by the book’s authors.

The authors combine systematic media and political analysis to explain how young Africans living in Melbourne came to be depicted as a unique criminal threat prior to the 2018 Victorian election. We apply evidence from community-based research to identify how the racialised panic about youth crime affected African Australian communities and examine the actions of Victoria Police in both responding to and reinforcing the law and order ‘crisis’.

While deeply rooted in local conditions, the book will resonate with similar instances of the criminalisation and ‘othering’ of racialised communities and the rise of anti-immigration and law and order politics in many parts of the world.

2. FROM 'APEX' TO '#AFRICANGANGS'

In the second chapter we address one of the key questions in the book: How is it that one particular group of relatively new arrivals – who are overwhelmingly law-abiding – came to be identified as a so-called threat to community safety? We do this by tracing the complex political and cultural processes that led to the construction of a so-called 'law and order crisis' in Victoria, in the lead-up to the 2018 State Election.

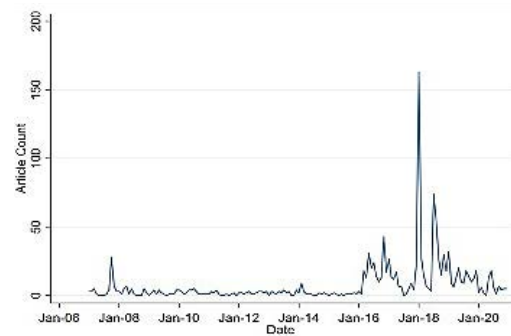
We begin by considering broadly how 'law and order auctions' have become embedded in the electoral cycles of English-speaking countries, reflecting the rise of 'penal populism' as an appeal to voters. In the rest of the chapter, we examine in detail how racialised myths about 'Apex' and 'African youth gangs' were generated and exaggerated by the media and politicians throughout the period 2016 to 2018. We show how both sides of politics tried to dominate arguments about public safety and public order. While the Liberals sought to amplify public fears and racialised dangers of so-called 'African gangs', Labor took a hard line against the perceived risk of youth crime in response.

Several undercurrents came together at this time to feed into public perceptions of risk. A small number of young people were committing serious crimes, such as 'home invasions', and these fears were compounded by a pervasive sense of a youth justice system in crisis. Perceived risks to community safety readily became associated with a visibly different group that had been identified as 'outsiders' from as early as 2007. This is when Federal Minister Kevin Andrews' blamed Sudanese Australians who were *victims* of serious racist violence for their apparent 'failure to integrate' in Australian society.

Social theorists have argued that risks associated with 'Others', who are deemed not to belong, are readily translated into perceptions of danger. Using the notion of 'dangerization', we argue this perceived dangerousness took embodied form in the heavily mythologised 'Apex Gang', and 'African youth crime' thus became a *category of menace* that was exploited by media and politicians, both State and Federal. This focus on dangerousness helped to obscure the racism that was driving this 'dangerizing' process, enabling those who engaged in it to preserve a vision of Victoria as a 'good society' that was tolerant, inclusive and multicultural.

This increasingly divisive narrative came to a head in early 2018. African Australians began challenging this racialised narrative on Twitter with positive messages about their communities, reclaiming the hashtag #AfricanGangs. Ultimately, the scare campaign run by the state Opposition proved unsuccessful as a political strategy, with the Liberals soundly defeated in the November 2018 election.

The prevalence of articles containing the keywords of interest per month.



This graph shows clearly that there was a delayed, yet significant increase in media reporting after the Moomba event in March 2016. Indeed, after the initial 'shock' following Moomba, the trend of articles on the theme of 'African crime' decreased. We then see a small jump approximately one year after Moomba, followed by a significant increase in media reporting in January 2018, leading up to the Victorian election.

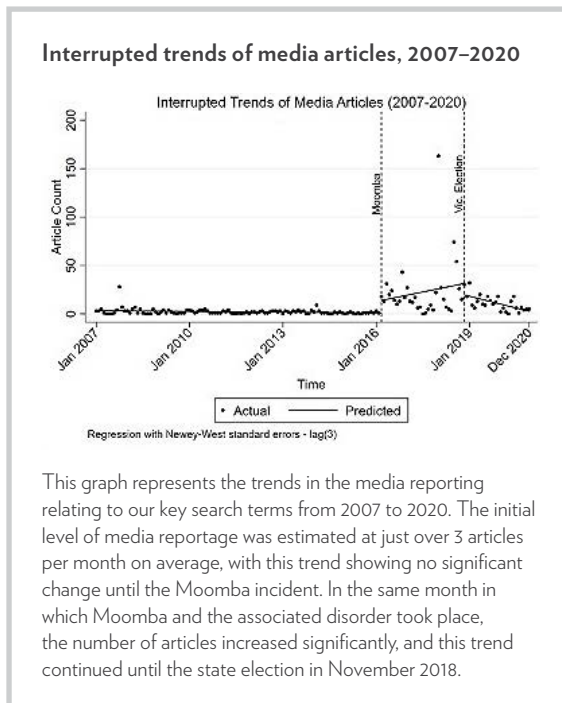
3. THE RACIALISATION OF CRIME: 'AFRICAN GANGS' AND THE MEDIA

Although the racialised narrative around 'African gangs' was particularly intense in the lead up to the 2018 state election, this was not the first time that Sudanese/South Sudanese communities had been the subject of unwanted attention from politicians and journalists. Previous research after the racist murder of Liep Gony in 2007 found that news stories pertaining to Sudanese communities were overwhelmingly focused on crime, with Sudanese/South Sudanese people framed as either perpetrators or victims.

In our book, we examined the media coverage of Sudanese/South Sudanese communities before the focus on Liep Gony and up to the Moomba incident, during the period of this incident, in the lead-up up to the 2018 election and for 12 months following it. We used a mixed-methods approach using both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

We used time-series analysis to assess whether trends in reporting about African crime were significantly different across specific periods of time from 2007 until 2020. We first identified relevant news publications through electronic searches of bibliographic databases, news pages and internet search engines. Our inclusion criteria comprised reports in English and those located in mainstream news publications. We ended up with 1479 independent sources.

To assess whether these peaks and troughs marked significant changes in media reporting we conducted a more detailed time series analysis, the results of which are shown in the graph below.



While there was no immediate shift in the number of articles published within the same month of the election, the number of articles began to significantly decrease after that at a rate of just over one article per month, which continued until the end of the data collection period in December 2020. This provides compelling evidence that reporting on this issue was strategically advanced to progress a particular narrative leading up to the Victorian election.

The steep decline following the election serves as further evidence that reporting was not tied to an ongoing problem with Sudanese/South Sudanese communities. Rather, given the loss of the election for the conservative party, the story was no longer appealing or of benefit to the Liberals' platform.

To get a stronger sense of the content of these articles, we conducted a thematic analysis of a sample of the top 100 most relevant articles based on the prominence and frequency of the search terms in addition to the date of publication. Three key themes emerged: violence, Blackness and criminality, and failure to settle well.

Regarding the first theme of *violence*, it was notable that the most prominent articles published in the lead-up to the Victorian election were not driven by actual crime events, but rather by the comments of federal politicians and commentators.

Regarding the association between Blackness and criminality, the media articles that we examined used language pertaining to youth crime that signifies Blackness as the culprit. While the framing of youth crime varied across articles, references to coded signifiers of Blackness and Otherness were pervasive.

Finally, many of the articles we reviewed discussed the criminal migrant or the 'crimmigrant' who should be subject to surveillance, punishment and exclusion. Opinion pieces, in particular, explicitly created a link between youth crime and anti-immigration sentiments.

4. 'NO-ONE THINKS YOU ARE INNOCENT': POLICING THE 'CRIMMIGRANT OTHER'

We have argued so far that being perceived as different and not belonging was central to the construction of African Australian youths as dangerous 'crimmigrants'. In this chapter we apply the findings from qualitative research conducted between 2016 and 2018 to consider how community members experienced policing during this period and how this, in turn, affected feelings of security and belonging.

The community-based study included young African Australians, some older community members, and youth workers. Before reporting their experiences, it is important to consider how police may themselves have contributed to community perceptions of African youths as a criminal threat.

Much of the time, but not always, media statements by senior and local members of Victoria Police attempted to tone down the racialised rhetoric around 'African gangs'. However, in creating a well-publicised African Australian Community Taskforce, police management also reinforced the perception of African Australians as a problem requiring a high level, emergency response.

In addition, some of the actions of local police that were reported by research participants were at odds with the public statements made by senior police, and reinforced negative messaging by conveying to onlookers that African Australians, by their mere presence, were a tangible threat to community safety.

With very few exceptions, interactions with police reported by both young people and older community members were negative. These negative encounters ranged from unexplained and intrusive stops involving questioning about identity, friendship networks and intentions, to the breaking up by police of groups of non-offending African youths, often while young people from other backgrounds were ignored.

Many research participants – including youth workers and young people of non-African ethnicity – confirmed the existence of an informal ‘hierarchy of discrimination’, in which young African Australians attracted even more police attention than other over-policed communities. A small sub-group of young people who had been in conflict with the law gave accounts of serious racial vilification and racially-motivated violence at the hands of police.

It is difficult to say whether this would have occurred in the absence of the political and media discourse that was the subject of previous chapters. However, young people often pointed to sensationalist media reporting as an inflammatory influence. As one young person put it, the media ‘make it sound like the cops aren’t doing their job, and then the cops react to that and then they go harder’.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the intensive policing reported by community members, both young and old, in this part of Melbourne was not just a *response* to the media-generated ‘African gangs’ crisis but was also a potential *contributor*, amplifying fears within the wider community through a process described in the book as the ‘politics of belonging’.

Research participants said that non-African Australians would cross the street or visibly clutch their bags on seeing them approach. One young person found himself wondering ‘Am I a criminal?’, while another noted ‘No-one thinks you are innocent’.

The outcome of both the racialised media reporting and negative experiences with police, as conveyed by these community members, was a profound sense of non-acceptance, loss of trust in police, and, tragically, a failure to obtain the sense of security that they had initially believed they would find in Australia.

5. IMPACT ON THE SOUTH SUDANESE AND WIDER AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES

In Chapter 5, we examine the impact of this political and media attention on the South Sudanese communities, and on the wider Australian community more broadly.

We highlight that resettling is a challenge for any incoming immigrant – but that there is an additional layer of complexity and difficulty for refugee immigrants that further compounds the upheaval of relocation. For new residents from a South Sudanese background, there are accompanying experiences of racism, profiling and discrimination that further intensify the challenges of the migration experience. Without a doubt, the most detrimental outcome of the law and order crisis was harm to the South Sudanese community themselves.

Moomba and its aftermath saw a greater increase in reports of everyday racism against South Sudanese Australians. This exposure not only harmed the settlement efforts of the South Sudanese communities in Melbourne, but also significantly fractured social cohesion within certain Melbourne suburbs. Inside the community, members described feeling under surveillance, and unsafe, in public places, being vilified and discriminated against in schools and having worse prospects of employment. Parents, particularly mothers, expressed their anxiety at having their parenting efficacy questioned.

In this chapter, we discuss the consequences of these issues on stigma, labelling and profiling, particularly on young people in their school environments; on family relationships and conflicts between generations – stemming from parents distrusting their children, and young people’s frustration about their parents believing the news media rather than their own children; and impacts on belonging and identity, with South Sudanese communities feeling isolated, rejected, misunderstood, and unworthy of belonging.

One of the clear issues for young people was a feeling of inconsistency and ‘belonging when it suits’. When they achieved something, such as an act of heroism, a graduation, an award, a sporting contract, they were labelled as Sudanese Australian. When they did the wrong thing, they were an African migrant and a clear outsider, or ‘the other’. This, as expected, had a huge impact on feelings of belonging for young people who are already at a difficult time of their development.

6. CONCLUSION: THE ANATOMY OF A LAW AND ORDER CRISIS

This book proceeds from the observation that, notwithstanding the ‘law and order crisis’ over ‘African gangs’, the face of violent crime in Melbourne remains overwhelmingly ‘non-African’, in that the majority of people charged with crimes against the person are Australian-born.

The question, then, is how and why a relatively newly arrived group of Melburnians came to be identified as a unique threat to community safety? The answer, we believe, rests in the process through which the physical and cultural difference of this relatively new migrant group was translated into perceptions of threat and viewed through the prism of danger. At the time of Moomba 2016, against this normative and discursive background, the idea of the dangerous other took embodied form in ‘South Sudanese youth’, whose supposed dangerousness was epitomised by the mythologised ‘Apex gang’.

We have shown how this occurred through the ongoing racialised and stigmatising representation of African Australians in public discourse – particularly through

the media — as dangerous ‘others’ and ‘crimmigrants’ incapable of integrating into Australian life. And we have argued that the intensive surveillance and over-policing of African youths in public places both responded to, and potentially inflated, community fears, while increasing insecurity and feelings of non-belonging amongst targeted groups.

Within this account, the extreme economic marginalisation, intergenerational trauma and systemic discrimination experienced by Sudanese and South Sudanese humanitarian migrants have been largely erased, so that any apparent difficulties arising from the settlement process can be attributed not to shortcomings in government support or a lack of community acceptance, but to the so-called failures of African communities themselves.

Sustained exposure to the criminalising discourse around ‘African gangs’ has taken a significant toll on the wellbeing of South Sudanese Australians. The serious social, emotional and practical impacts of these events have been clearly articulated through opinion pieces authored by leading commentators from within African Australian communities (see Media Commentaries below). In adding to this commentary on the impacts of the ‘law and order crisis’ on the communities targeted by these events, we do not claim to speak on their behalf. Rather, we have attempted to convey the experiences and concerns that were expressed to us by community members in the course of multiple community-based studies.

As noted by one research participant who discussed her experiences with us: ‘When we come here, we think we belong here. We are citizens here, not just come and go back. But not anymore because of the crisis created by media and government. The government should treat us as their own people. But they give authority to police more than us’.

Sacrificing the security of one section of the population by presenting them as a danger to others, in order to promote a semblance of security for the majority, is a divisive strategy that substitutes for proactive efforts to promote equality and build the foundations of genuine social harmony. This book stands as a record of how the law and order ‘crisis’ around ‘African gangs’ evolved, and as a testament to its damaging effects.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More information about *Place, Race and Politics: The Anatomy of a Law and Order Crisis*, including a partial download of chapter one, can be found [here](#).

Related academic publications

Benier, K., Blaustein, J., Johns, D. & Maher, S. (2018) ‘Don’t drag me into this’ Growing up South Sudanese in Victoria after the 2016 Moomba ‘riot’ Report. Centre for Multicultural Youth.

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Media commentaries

Santilla Chingaipa ‘Race, stereotyping and Melbourne’s Apex gang’, *The Saturday Paper*, Feb 25 – Mar 3, 2017

Nyadol Nyuon ‘The Victorian election and the politics of fear’, *The Saturday Paper*, Nov 24-30, 2018.

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