

# POLICING INTERNAL BORDERS

## Risk-based policing and belonging

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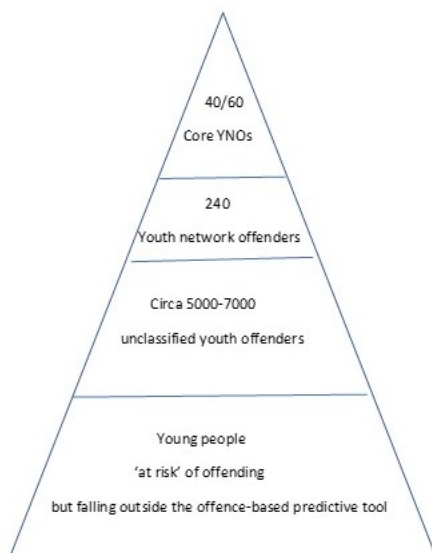
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### The study

From mid-2016 to mid-2018 a series of focus groups, interviews and discussions were conducted with youth workers, young people and some adult members from culturally diverse communities living in the Greater Dandenong and Casey area. In total 80 community participants were included in the formal data collection, with a particular focus on young people from Pasifika and Sudanese backgrounds. Young people were asked to recount both positive and negative experiences with police, and invited to report how these encounters had made them feel. Six interviews were conducted with Victoria Police personnel to provide context about the approach taken to the policing of young people in the area. Risk-based and predictive policing methods emerged as the predominant policing style being employed. This study was not an evaluation of these tactics. However, many of the experiences reported by community members could be understood as arising from these practices.

### Risk-based policing

Intelligence-led or risk-based policing is the pre-eminent mode of policing around the developed world today. It is technology-enabled and provides a powerful tool for targeting police resources by analysing crime and other data to identify risky people and places. The use of risk categories and predictive modelling has now developed to the extent that aspects of this style of policing are often referred to as predictive or preventive policing in which police intervention may occur before particular crimes or incidents of disorder take place.



The Victoria Police employ a risk-based system that classifies young people who have been in conflict with the law as 'youth network offenders (YNOs)' or 'core youth network offenders'. A senior local officer explained: 'We can run that tool now and it will tell us - like the kid might be 15 - it tells how many crimes he is going to commit before he is 21 based on that, and it is a 95% accuracy. It has been tested.'

These categorisations are based primarily on the number and type of previous offending. To be classified as a 'core YNO' a 10 to 14 year old has to be charged with at least 20 offences. The threshold for 15 to 17 year olds is 30 or more charges, and for 18 to 22 year olds is 60-plus. Figures in the diagram opposite were accurate at the time of interview for Dandenong Division.

A wider range of data, including family circumstances, missing persons reports or police contacts, is used to identify young people 'at risk' of future offending: 'So they might not have committed a crime but they have been checked at midnight a couple of times, out with other kids.' (Local senior officer)

Police dealings with young people are largely determined by these risk classifications. At risk young people may be referred to multi-agency programs for 'early intervention' support aimed at preventing their entry into the criminal justice system. YNOs, particularly core YNOs, are more likely to receive intensive monitoring and police intervention.

## Intelligence-gathering

Young people who participated in this study said they were often asked about their age, identity and friendship networks and required to account for their presence when they were gathering in public places, using public transport or simply walking along the street. These experiences are consistent with the demands of risk-based systems for the collection of community intelligence. As a senior officer explained: ‘Without information, there would be no way of predicting which youth are at the greatest risk of entering the justice system ... sometimes, that needs some form of intrusive discussions with them, in relation to gathering information’.

These requests for information in the absence of offending related to the mapping of young people’s relationship networks: ‘We’ve got a tool that actually goes behind all our data sets that we just hit a button and that allows us to go “OK, this youth was checked a week ago or a few days ago with this YNO”’ (Local senior officer). While the stated intention was to allow specialist officers to contact families and assess the support needs of young people considered to be at risk of offending, aspects of the methods used to pursue this positive goal were experienced by research participants as intrusive, distressing and humiliating, as outlined in the next section.

Moreover, the reliance on ‘community engagement’ for information gathering was said to be especially important in relation to ‘emerging communities’, including young people from South Sudanese and Pasifika backgrounds.

‘The other thing that we’ve noticed is that [the system is] really good for the WASP kind of background of youth. It’s not for the new and emerging youth within the community, because there’s an under-reporting of family violence, under-reporting of missing youth. So, what we’ve now done is ... we’re looking to see how often those youth are being checked on the street with YNOs’ (Senior local officer).

## Citizenship and belonging

Young people in this study reported a wide range of negative feelings arising from encounters with police, as depicted in the word cloud opposite. These experiences are likely to undermine their sense of belonging - a concept that was widely equated with safety, freedom, social acceptance and equal treatment - and undermine other efforts being made to reduce the risk of youth offending.

Young people who had been in conflict with the law complained that high levels of police intervention interfered with efforts to change their lives. One young person reported being told by an officer ‘you’re going to be in the system forever’, reflecting the data-driven nature of risk-based policing. Another participant said: ‘They are trying to judge you on your past’.

Some young people and adult participants in this study noted that the pre-emptive breaking up of groups of young people was disrespectful of cultural norms, and sent a message to the wider community that they were an inherent threat. These systemic, risk-based practices were identified in the study as contributing to a wider ‘politics of belonging’ by influencing perceptions about who belongs in public places. Openly discriminatory treatment, such as targeting young people from Pasifika or South Sudanese backgrounds for questioning and move-on directions while ignoring youths from other backgrounds, amplified this effect.

The responses reported by young people to negative encounters with police ranged from appeasement to resistance to avoidance. Most young people wished to be free of police contact when they were not doing anything wrong, and appreciated fair and respectful treatment when they were at fault. There was a widespread desire for improved relations with police, and being treated equally was sometimes equated with being recognised as full citizens. However, one South Sudanese mother summed up the feeling amongst many, that ‘police should be the one to be there for you. And then imagine if the police themselves are your worry’.

**Further information** The full reports from this study can be found [here](#) and [here](#).



Prepared for the Border Crossing Observatory by A/Professor Leanne Weber, May 2020  
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