

# *The 'Thin White Line': Juvenile Crime, Racialised Narrative And Vigilantism – A North Queensland Study*

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## **Introduction**

Over the past few years the reaction of state and territory governments in Australia to the problem of 'law and order' has been to introduce a raft of 'get tough' measures aimed at eradicating crime in general and juvenile crime in particular (Hogg & Brown 1998). While high levels of juvenile crime are now widely regarded as an actuarial feature of liberal democratic states (Garland 1996), certain categories of offenders are held more responsible than others for its emergence and persistence (Young 1996).

This article examines how Indigenous juvenile crime has been represented in many quarters as virtually synonymous with a more general 'crime problem'. Such representations have served both to position Indigenous juvenile offenders as the primary agents of lawlessness and to shape social responses to the 'problem of crime'. Governmental responses to juvenile crime have included harsher penalties (including mandatory sentencing); changes to policing policy and practice - particularly in relation to young people in public places (White 1996), and the 'strengthening' of police/community relations (Hogg & Brown 1998). At the 'informal' neighbourhood level, a range of non state-sponsored responses have also emerged to tackle juvenile crime in local areas. These include 'anti-crime' groups, 'citizen action' alliances, 'street patrols', local 'defence' groups and various other forms of 'autonomous' crime control (Johnson 1996, Hogg & Brown 1998, Hil 1998). This article draws attention to one radical variant of localised informalism, namely, 'vigilantism'. Although mindful of the definitional problems associated with such a concept (as well as its caricatured status in Hollywood films and popular fiction), we nonetheless argue that elements of such phenomena tend to characterise the way in which some individuals and groups respond to the perceived threat of crime in local areas.

Specifically, we focus on the emergence of spontaneous forms of vigilantism in an outer suburb of a North Queensland city in which the reactive actions of local residents were rapidly transformed into a *racialised* form of autonomous crime control. This involved the

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identification of both offenders *and* the 'crime problem' in terms of their essential racial character. For local residents the threat and/or actual occurrence of crime was regarded as synonymous with the very presence of Indigenous families, and especially Indigenous young people, in their midst. This hinged on a view of 'Indigenous crime' as ubiquitous, widespread and historically contingent. In other words, local folk knowledge deemed that Indigenous people constitute a serious threat to social order. As the case study below indicates, such views intersected with a number of other discursive articulations relating to notions of 'reverse egalitarianism' whereby Indigenous people are said to receive preferential treatment in the criminal justice system. It was argued by those directly and indirectly involved in vigilante action that differential treatment manifests itself in a system of justice that is favourably *disposed* towards and/or *constrained* by the preferential racial status of Indigenous offenders. Thus, the prevailing belief was that because of their racial status Indigenous young people, when compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts, 'get away with' crime and delinquency.

Before examining the accounts of local residents more closely it is necessary to locate their accounts in a wider historical context. We argue that it is important to acknowledge the historically contingent nature of racialised accounts of 'black crime' in so far as they are informed by a long-established belief that Indigenous people constitute a serious threat to social order.

### **The Construction of Indigenous People as a 'Problem'**

Until quite recently the historiography of Indigenous Australia has been characterised by a somewhat romantic, idealised and/or obscurantist view of events since 1788 (Attwood 1989, Pilger 1990). 'Obscurantist' in the sense that the hardships experienced by Australia's Indigenous people were either represented as a minor conflict in the inevitable march of 'progress', or ignored entirely (Reynolds 1999, Hall 1998). The recording of killings and removals perpetrated against Indigenous people by the colonial forces has only come to sharp relief in the post-war period (Reynolds 1996). Indeed, the revisionist history of Australia demonstrates the means by which Indigenous peoples were subjected to the worst excesses of colonial domination.

Relations between Indigenous people and the British colonisers were relatively peaceful during the initial phases of invasion. Although surprised, confused and even horrified by the ominous presence of a strange, pale people, the Indigenous people and the colonisers did not immediately engage in hostilities following the arrival of the first fleet on 26 January 1788 (Reynolds 1993). However, the early establishment of a penal colony in New South Wales and the gradual expansion westwards (mainly to plant crops in order to bolster the dwindling food supply) soon led to violent encounters between Indigenous people and 'settlers'. The superior weaponry of the British troops placed Indigenous people in a disadvantageous position, even though the latter's acquaintance with the topography of the bush and use of spears and other arms meant that they were frequently able to counter the aggressions of the colonising forces (Reynolds 1995).

During the early phases of colonisation Indigenous people began to be seen by 'settlers' and the legal establishment as something of a 'problem'. Indigenous people were thus represented as the aggressors while the 'bush' settlers were seen as hapless and innocent victims (Reynolds 1987). As the skirmishes between settlers and 'natives' continued successive territory governors granted approval to settlers in order to 'repel' those Indigenous people who encroached on their properties (Markus 1990).

Although efforts were made by the authorities to curtail some of the 'excesses' of settlers (for example, by hanging several white vigilante settlers for the Myall Creek massacre in 1838), it became increasingly difficult for colonial administrations to contain the actions of the Europeans (Elder 1988). As Reynolds observes: "With the explosive expansion of settlement in the 1830s and 1840s there was a commensurate growing in the scope of vigilante violence" (Reynolds 1987: 40). The idea of 'universal terror' advocated by governors unleashed a number of brutal actions against Indigenous people, including shootings, poisonings, assaults and wholesale massacres of men, women and children (Elder 1988, Hall 1998). Such actions were often justified on the grounds that Indigenous people posed a threat to the economic and physical well being of settlers and their families. Many settlers also regarded natives as little more than 'savages' whose attacks on life and property were an affront to the Christian ethos of British rule (Reynolds 1981).

Many of the early settlers were drawn from the criminalised and brutalised sections of the English 'casual poor'. As unwilling migrants this population had experienced both the ravages of the industrial revolution in their home country and the harsh discipline of the new colony. As a result, they frequently exercised their frustrations against Indigenous people. As Broome (1982: 25) points out: "The Aborigines, and especially Aboriginal women, proved easy victims for the embittered convicts".

For the colonial administrators Indigenous people were seen "... in much the same light as they regarded those groups which they also deemed as 'other'" (Attwood 1989: 83). As one coloniser put it: "... blacks should be coerced just as the (European) coerces children and lunatics who cannot take care of themselves" (cited in Attwood 1989: 83). 'Coercion' involved both the use of force to achieve domination over Indigenous people and the institutionalisation of them in accordance with the growing 'regimentation' of other 'problem populations' during the nineteenth century (Foucault 1977). The latter process was intended variously to 'civilise', Christianise and 'breed out' the existence of an allegedly inferior people.

From 1820 onwards as the colonisers moved beyond the Sydney area to other parts of NSW the processes of violent engagement with and institutionalisation of 'natives' gathered pace. 'Native institutions' and the early missions were established to 'civilise' and Christianise Indigenous people. Associated strategies included the wholesale removal of Indigenous people from their homeland to often barren and remote islands (as occurred with the Tasmanian Aborigines in the 1820s) and the systematic removal of children from their families and homelands.

The latter process was based on the racist premise that these children would benefit from the 'civilising' influence of white families. Yet, as has been graphically documented in a recent major report on the policy of child removals, indigenous children - most of whom were girls aged 12 years or older - were used as domestic servants (often with no pay), held on the edges of family life or marginalised and excluded altogether (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997). Many experienced forms of abuse and neglect. The process of removal continued well into the twentieth century and resulted in thousands of children being torn away from their families, communities and ways of life.

The movement of settlers from the 1860s to Queensland, South Australia and various parts of Western Australia led to an escalation of 'frontier conflict'. Cut-off from their traditional sources of food and water supply, Indigenous people raided settlers' livestock and resources. Reprisal killings perpetrated by the colonisers extended well beyond those regarded as an immediate threat to the interests of pastoralists, to all Indigenous people including women, children and the aged. Massacres at places like Tarcoom, Queensland

(1857) and frequent vigilante activity (comprising settlers and the police), and the actions of the notorious Native Police Forces led to an increasing death toll among Indigenous people, particularly in NSW and Queensland (Broome 1982). The further expansion of settlers into north and far north Queensland and the Northern Territory from 1879 onwards escalated the slaughter of Indigenous people. As Broome notes, for every settler ten Indigenous people were killed. By the late 1850s (covering a 60 year period of expansionism) at least 20,000 Indigenous people out of a total of 300,000 had been killed (Broome 1982: 51).

Throughout the period of expansion Indigenous people became increasingly subject to the dictates of the criminal law. Laws were designed to criminalise Indigenous people for a variety of offences (drunkenness, vagrancy and so forth), while many of the deleterious practices of the colonisers were conveniently ignored. The interests of Indigenous people themselves, their spiritual connection to the land and attachment to a traditional way of life, were overlooked in favour of a definition of them as a law and order problem. This provided the necessary pretext for a range of punitive and regulatory measures that were aimed at the control of the Indigenous population. Such control was in part a reflection of the general problematisation of this section of the population that had occurred in varying forms since the earliest days of colonisation.

Alarmed by news of atrocities and imbued with humanitarian sentiments, British parliamentarians and social and religious activists called increasingly for greater 'protection' of Indigenous people. But 'protection' came to signify a paternalistic approach in the context of the new order. The growing institutionalisation of Indigenous people in terms of their forced placement in missions and on reserves continued alongside the policies of child removal. Indeed, the introduction of legislation in a number of states and territories in the 1930s saw thousands of 'half caste' children taken from their families and placed in white families well away from their homelands (Gilbert 1993). The rationale for this policy was, in the words contained in the *Native Administration Act*, Western Australia, to institutionalise Indigenous children into the ways of 'white civilisation' or, as administrators in the Northern Territory noted, to 'breed out colour' (cited in Irving, Maunders & Sherington 1995: 20).

In a related way, the policy of assimilation, introduced in the 1940s, was also designed to eradicate a distinctive Indigenous identity (Creamer 1998: 46). Based on the proposition that Indigenous people could, through 'appropriate' policies of (re)socialisation, be inculcated with all aspects of the 'Australian way of life', the policy of assimilation was designed to put an end to a distinctive Indigenous culture. Whereas the pretence of previous protectionist policies was to care for a dying race, assimilation now called for the official removal of the culture altogether (Creamer 1988: 46).

The problematisation of Indigenous people made it possible for the dominant regime to engage in a continual search for 'solutions' to the 'Aboriginal problem'. The governance of Indigenous people, from the earliest phases of colonisation to the policies of assimilation and beyond, has been infused with a belief that the presence of Indigenous people on Australian soil constitutes a problem requiring urgent solutions.

## Indigenous People and Contemporary Cultures of Crime Control

The representation of Indigenous people as a law and order problem continues to have a strong hold on public perceptions of the crime problem. As Cunneen states:

An important part of the discourse on law and order has been the racist doctrine, which identifies Aboriginal people as the cause of the 'crime problem'. Along with the growth of 'law and order' politics and the introduction of special legislation aimed at young Aboriginal people there has been a substantial re-organisation and re-equipping of state police forces resulting in more coercive and para-militarised police practices – such as the use of the Tactical Response Group in the Redfern district of Sydney (Cunneen 1994a: 152)

Cunneen further notes that:

... the political characterisation of aboriginal young people as a law and order problem, especially when understood without an appreciation of the historical role played by the police in a colonial society, provides the structure to the social dynamics of policing Aboriginal young people (Cunneen 1994: 152)

Policing (and indeed the whole apparatus of crime control) needs to be viewed historically in the context of the racist policies of successive governments (for instance, in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, support for the actions of expansionist settlers and participation in 'special operations') and in the continued differential treatment of Indigenous people, including higher apprehension and arrest rates and 'over-policing' of communities (Cunneen 1994b).

Policing practice has contributed in large measure to the over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system (Bailey-Harris, Gale & Wundersitz 1990). Understood in the discursive context of a culture that continues to regard Indigenous people in the most pejorative of terms, and certainly as a threat to social order, such practices have included discriminatory and differential policing practices (Cunneen 1995, Blagg & Wilkie 1995).

The disproportionate levels of policing in Indigenous communities (Cunneen 1994) are partly attributable to the perception that 'they' constitute a major law and order problem. Moreover, recent years have witnessed calls by politicians and others for greater control and regulation of Indigenous people, particularly in public places (White 1999). Differential approaches by the police to indigenous youth, often involving harsh and even brutal forms of intervention, have been well documented elsewhere (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1990, Cunneen 1994). Additionally, the continued focus on public order offences, such as drunkenness and breach of the peace and the emergence of 'law and order campaigns' in states such as NSW (Robb & Cunneen 1987), and Western Australia (Beresford & Omaji 1996), have hardened perceptions that Indigenous people are primarily responsible for the 'crime problem'. Curfews and informal modes of crime control (such as anti-crime groups, vigilante groups etc.) have often been aimed at Indigenous people (Simpson & Simpson 1993, Hil 1998). These actions, invariably associated with calls to 'clear the streets' of Indigenous people and to 'get tough' on Indigenous offenders, are in their own way reflective of an on-going discourse that positions Indigenous people as a major problem. Media accounts of the 'crime problem' have further heightened concerns over Indigenous people by concentrating largely on negative news reports that once again represent this section of the population as a law and order problem (Sercombe 1994). For example, during the early 1990s Western Australia witnessed an unprecedented moral panic over juvenile crime, particularly in relation to car theft and high-speed car chases. The fact that most of those apprehended for car theft were Indigenous soon fed into wider assumptions about the connections between black youth and

juvenile crime: "In the public mind, the term 'juvenile offender' became synonymous with the word Aboriginal" (Laurie cited in Beresford & Omaji 1996: 22). Such representations served to situate the police and Indigenous youth in stark, oppositional terms so that the former were seen by the media as the 'goodies' while young (Indigenous) car thieves were regarded as 'irredeemably bad' (Beresford & Omaji 1996: 23).

Although these simplistic portrayals eschew the complex processes by which the 'crime problem' is constructed, the imagery nonetheless has a powerful influence on the way in which 'public opinion' is shaped (Young 1996). As a result, there exists an enduring association between the crime problem and certain supposedly troublesome or 'criminogenic' populations (Davis 1997). The 'double jeopardy' associated with being both young and black means that for those who 'watch' and 'notice' outbreaks of crime in their localities it is Indigenous youth who are often considered to pose the most direct and serious threat to public order and safety. In the current climate of a supposed 'law and order crisis' in which governments seek to extend the powers of the police and courts to contain the 'rising tide of crime', it is hardly surprising that the most sustained attention has been focused on Indigenous youth.

The available evidence suggests that Indigenous young people have been the target of excessive and often brutal methods of policing over the past few years (Blagg & Wilkie 1995; Cunneen & Macdonald 1996, Cunneen & White 1996). Attacks by racist and neo-fascist organisations (such as the Ku Klux Klan) have also been perpetrated against Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. (The founding of a KKK chapter in Sydney has recently attracted considerable debate on the presence of extremist racist organisations throughout Australia.) Some indication of the extent of violence used against Indigenous youth can be discerned from the findings of the *National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991). Based on a series of public hearings and evidence obtained from witnesses in various cities, including Sydney, Perth, Townsville and Adelaide as well as group discussions, organised by the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the report concluded that:

The evidence before the inquiry shows clearly that the problem of racist violence against Aboriginal and islander people is widespread across Australia. Furthermore, the forms of racist violence manifest themselves in a number of social and institutional arenas. Clearly a major problem: '...is racist violence by police officers' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991: 119).

It was further concluded that: 'The portrayal of Aboriginal people as a law and order problem, as a group to be feared, or as a group outside assumed socially homogenous values provides legitimacy for acts of racist violence' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991: 121). Such acts of violence were readily apparent in a variety of situations such as parks, streets, hotels and directly on the homes of Indigenous people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991: 72-77). The Inquiry also noted the role played by racist and extremist groups, such as the KKK, in carrying out violent attacks against Indigenous people (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991: 77-8).

It is clear from the report (and particularly from a reading of violent incidents recorded in a detailed appendix) that many such attacks were likely to have been organised, premeditated and aimed at inflicting often severe violence against defenceless Indigenous people (Human Rights and Equal opportunity Commission 1991: 478-535). In many such cases the victims were Indigenous youth who seemed most vulnerable to the violent excesses of both police officers and groups of non-Indigenous people in a number of Australia's major towns and cities. The effects of such attacks on the victims were consistently severe in both psychological and physical terms (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991: 115).

Indigenous people have experienced endemic and widespread racist violence often at the hands of self-appointed crime control groups who see them as responsible for the 'crime problem'. It is against this background of negative typification that the responses of residents to localised outbreaks of juvenile crime need to be understood. Enduring images of Indigenous people as a 'law and order problem' continues to shape the way in which this section of the population is regarded. For local residents experiencing crime committed by young people, but especially by Indigenous youth, images of Indigenous people as an enduring 'problem' intersect with long-standing assumptions about the problem of crime. Autonomous action may thus be justified on the basis that 'black crime' is so pervasive that urgent solutions need to be found. Before turning to our case example from a North Queensland city we first attempt to elaborate on the meaning of 'vigilantes'.

## The Meaning of Vigilantism

The word 'vigilante' tends to evoke the dramatic and fictive imagery of a 'lone gun' or posse taking the law into their own hands. Partly as a result of such portrayals the term has long been held in disrepute by social scientists. Indeed, vigilantism has often been applied inappropriately to actions taken by various 'anti-crime' groups. As such, considerable caution needs to be exercised when using the word for analytical purposes.

Despite the absence of a clear definition, vigilantism has been referred to in historical studies of nineteenth century colonial 'frontiers' and in relation to various accounts of paramilitary organisations around the world (Johnson 1992). Vigilantism has also been mentioned as a feature of the apparent 'collapse' of the British legal system (Rose 1994); as a symptom of the politics of reconstruction in South Africa (Cohen 1994); and as an outgrowth of 'populist' or 'do-it-yourself' justice in Northern Ireland (Johnson 1996). Despite such coverage the word has generally escaped precise definition. In one of the few attempts to elucidate its sociological characteristics, Les Johnson refers to vigilantism as:

... a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force – or threatened force – by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalised norms by individuals or groups – or to their intended or imputed transgression. Such acts are focused upon crime control and/or social control and aim to offer assurances (or 'guarantees') of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order (Johnson 1996: 232).

Although preferable to more simplistic 'definitions' of vigilantism as 'self-appointed law breakers' (Nash 1994: 410), Johnson fails to distinguish clearly between various sorts of vigilante type actions that might emerge to deal with crime in local areas. A typology has therefore been developed which encompasses three broad 'autonomous' vigilante responses to juvenile crime. They are reactive vigilantism, preventative vigilantism and trans-vigilantism (Dawes & Hil 1998). Briefly, reactive vigilantism refers to those instances in which citizens in response to actual crime in a given locality take action. Preventative vigilantism is anticipatory in so far as it involves a planned response to an outbreak of crime which has yet to occur. 'Trans-vigilantism' refers to the 'slippage' of formally constituted groups (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch) into vigilante type activity. Given the nature of events in the Townsville suburb described below we focused our attention on reactive vigilantism.

Reactive vigilantism derives from a number of overarching motivations. At one level it may be an expression of a specifically masculinist form of behaviour that constitutes a culturally-specific, violent 'solution' to the perceived or actual threat of crime. This, however, tends to essentialise a form of action in which women may also take a direct and

indirect role. Vigilantism can be considered as a statement of intention or as a strategic and countervailing response to the threat of crime. This may account for the fact that when vigilante members are questioned by the media they often 'talk up' their involvement in the hope that this instils fear in the potential offender (Dawes & Hill 1998). Reactive vigilantism, on the other hand, may be explained in terms of 'self defence', 'self protection', or as a means of establishing a sense of 'security', or even as a way of demonstrating strength and fortitude to others in the local community.

'Law and order vigilantism' – the focused action relating to an imagined or actual crime problem – may also overlap with other matters that lead to calls for autonomous action. For instance, concerns over local crime problems may intersect with other matters such as perceived family breakdown, moral collapse and degeneracy as well as a sense that one group (Indigenous people) are receiving preferential treatment from the state (Hogg & Brown 1998: 1-15). The emergence of autonomous action may also be connected to discourses around 'self protection', as occurred in relation to the recent 'gun debate' and in the controversy over 'home invasion' killings. In such cases people may draw on libertarian and populist ideas of 'citizens rights' as opposed to 'being told what to do' by an authoritarian state. The sense of alienation felt by those caught in a changing socio-cultural climate and who feel that governments are 'weak' and that society is experiencing some kind of internal moral collapse may well predispose them to engage in autonomous action.

The motives for vigilantism are often linked to quite specific concerns over the 'crime problem'. Foster (1996) notes in her study of a London housing estate that perceptions of high crime may provide the impetus for group alliances to be formed, mainly as a way of engendering a collective *sense* of security in the face of an imminent threat. Likewise, as Shapeland & Vagg (1998: 175-176) point out in a study of rural and urban communities in England, the common neighbourhood practices of 'watching' and 'noticing' suggest that processes of informalism play an important role in shaping community reactions to crime. As a potential by-product of such localised responses vigilantism may provide a real or illusory way of coping with the actual or imagined threat of crime in a given area. Rose (1994) points to a lack of confidence in the police (often as a result of direct experience) and to discriminatory and differential forms of policing exercised against 'problem populations'. Thus, the presence of vigilantism in the social body may also reflect a criminal justice system 'in crisis' in so far as the forces of law and order appear unable to deal effectively with an omnipresent 'crime problem'.

## **A One Person Crime Wave: A Case Study of Racialised Vigilantism in Townsville**

### ***Background*<sup>1</sup>**

Conville is an outer-western suburb Townsville. Largely made up of low to medium density housing the area is characterised by its relatively high proportion of Housing Commission dwellings, sole parent families and high levels of unemployment and 'welfare dependency' (Townsville City Council 1993). There is a growing presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the area, a number of whom have been relocated by the council from an inner city area. Conville is not well serviced by public transport, although there is a major shopping centre within a reasonable distance for most residents. Despite the construction of a local multiplex cinema and plans for a public swimming pool and other

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1 All place and people names used are pseudonyms.



sports facilities the area is generally short of leisure and recreation facilities. Young people frequently complain of boredom, especially in out-of-school-hours (Youth and Community Combined Action 1993). The area has something of a 'reputation' in the wake of repeated stories in the local media about juvenile crime. Indeed, the regional newspaper, *The Townsville Bulletin*, as well as the free commercial papers, frequently contain stories of crime waves and bouts of 'teen terror' wrought by young people. Figures, however, reveal that the area within which the suburb is located is about average in terms of rates of Children's Court appearance and charges (Criminal Justice Commission 1992, Queensland Department of Families and Community Care 1998). Data show that the offences committed by juveniles are largely those of the 'nuisance' variety, including shoplifting, break and enter and criminal damage (Criminal Justice Commission 1995).

The vigilantism that occurred in 1996 involved residents from two streets. Most activity, however, centred on one 'notorious' crescent in which a spate of break-ins had occurred between February and March of 1996. The crescent is made up of a mixture of houses, units and flats at least half a dozen of which stand empty awaiting tenants. A number of entries leading to parks and other venues run off the crescent, thus allowing for easy 'escape routes' for any would-be offender. Significantly, it is the houses next to these entries that are empty.

Between March and July of 1996, a flurry of reports appeared in the Townsville press about the rising level of juvenile crime in Conville. It appeared that residents had been subjected repeatedly to bouts of robbery, burglary and theft carried out by 'at least four gangs, each of about six youths and boys aged 9-17' (*Townsville Bulletin* 16 April 1996). Concerns were expressed by a local politician about 'blatant' and 'brazen' thefts from shops by Indigenous youth – as well as claims that police officers were reluctant to take action against 'Indigenous' juveniles (*Townsville Bulletin* 29 July 1996). More specifically, most attention centred upon an eleven-year-old Indigenous girl. It was reported that the girl: '...allegedly has single-handedly increased the number of thefts from houses by 50 percent in the two months she lived in this area'. In another report: 'Homes hit by one-kid crime wave' (*Townsville Sun*, 3 April 1996), it was noted that the girl had casually entered the homes of at least 100 local residents and removed wallets and items of jewellery and other household items.

The data for this study was collected from the residents of the crescent, which highlighted their concerns about a 'crime wave', brought about by Indigenous youth in the area. The data was obtained through an analysis of newspaper articles and semi-structured interviews with those who lived in the area at the time of the 'crime wave'. Our aim during the early stages of the research was merely to contrast the accounts of residents with the stories that appeared in the local press. As the interviews progressed, however, it became apparent that the motives for vigilante activity were deeply embedded in a complex range of motives, many of which were connected to assumptions about widespread 'black crime' in Queensland.

### *The study*

Following identification of the crescent in which vigilante activity was said to have occurred the initial research plan was to undertake in-depth interviews with those directly involved in vigilante type activity. This proved difficult for two reasons: first, there was considerable reluctance among residents to speak about actions that could be deemed illegal and second, residents refused to identify others who may have been involved in such activity. Eventually, however, access was obtained through a protracted process of 'word-of-mouth' communication in which one resident informed others of the confidential and

anonymous nature of the research. A 'snowballing effect' took hold and eventually we were able to interview the coordinator of the local 'community action group' who first alerted us to the location of the vigilante activity, four crescent residents who had detailed knowledge of vigilante activity (in one case actually witnessing a failed attempt to apprehend two young burglars) and two actual vigilante members. Interviews were conducted mostly in respondent's homes and were tape-recorded. Although the number of interviewees was small they nonetheless provided us with rich and detailed information about the nature of what turned out to be short-lived and spontaneous autonomous action. The coordinator and others who did not participate directly in the actions were long standing residents, having lived in the community for several years or more. The vigilante members were male, married and in their early to late thirties. The majority of respondents had lived in Townsville and the surrounding areas for most of their lives. All the respondents were white and came from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. Despite having reservations about Conville, particularly in terms of its distance from the city centre, the 'poor' leisure and recreational facilities and the growing presence of Indigenous people, all said they were committed to staying in the area. They spoke about Conville as a 'community' that 'was going through some problems'. One respondent, however, spoke about the fall in house prices and the reluctance of people to move to the area given its reputation as a crime 'hot spot'. As conversations proceeded about the nature and origins of crime in the local area it became clear that Indigenous young people and Indigenous people in general were seen as a major threat to social order. Such accounts were often couched in language that was designed to play down the racial nature of references to Indigenous people, including preambles such as 'I'm not racist/prejudiced but...' and/or 'don't get me wrong, its not just coloured kids that cause trouble but...' and/or 'I know its not fashionable to say these things but ...' and/or '... some of them are alright but its...' and so forth.

The main talking point among the respondents was the spate of crimes that had occurred during the early months of 1996 by one Indigenous girl and/or an 'Aboriginal gang'. This was referred to as 'a nightmare', a 'crime wave' or 'a state of siege'. Residents described how they had purchased expensive home security to counter the threat posed by the gang, and how they feared leaving their homes. The Indigenous girl (a tall and slender 11-year-old) was adept at sliding through partially closed doors and windows, often when the residents were at home. (The girl had been apprehended on a number of occasions and not long after the completion of this study she was sentenced to a period of detention in the Townsville Youth centre). There is little doubt that the girl and many of her young associates (most of whom were indeed Indigenous) committed many of the alleged offences. There is also little doubt that the crimes committed by these young people caused great trauma to the residents.

### *Reflections*

The girl and her friends during the course of this study allegedly committed a number of crimes. News spread quickly among residents about homes being broken into and personal possessions being spirited away any time, day or night. A truck-driver described how he lost his microwave oven while he sat in his lounge room watching television.

I was just sitting there one night watching the news and having a beer. No one else was home. I got up to go to the toilet and noticed that the front door was open. I looked outside and this little figure waddling down the bloody street with this microwave over her shoulder. I couldn't believe it .. she must have gone through the back door and straight through the house ... the bloody gall.

Such accounts were often referenced by the fact that the perpetrator was Indigenous who, along with other 'gang members', had been responsible for a series of robberies in the area. Discussion of the crimes were soon projected onto a concern with the threat posed by Indigenous not only in the local area, but throughout Queensland. As one resident put it:

Crime by Aboriginal kids is a statewide problem. It's not only communities like ours that are being affected, it's countless others. And we're helpless to do anything about it.

A major concern of the residents was that law enforcement agencies seemed to have no answer to the 'Aboriginal problem' and that the courts were doing little to prevent young people from re-offending. At the same time, there was a perception that the criminal justice system was more effective in deterring non-Indigenous youth from offending but had less success in dealing with Indigenous youth. Such outcomes, it was said, had the potential of creating a chasm between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and non-aboriginal people in the area. Len, a retiree who lived in the area for fifteen years, spoke of the effects of law enforcement agencies in curbing the offending behaviour of Indigenous young people:

They know the system. They know very well that as soon as the cops ask you a question that you haven't got to answer it. The police treat the white and black kids differently. With the white kids they grab them, they get pulled in. 'OK what have you been doing?' they're asked and their bloody mouths are wide open because they are shit scared of them. With black kids they don't seem to be scared because these kids are street smart. This creates a lot of bad blood between white and blacks around here.

There was a general perception among the respondents that the high visual presence of Indigenous youth in public spaces was in itself a reason for concern. It was alleged that 'gangs' of 'dark youths' were walking the streets late at night or congregating in the nearby park or in the local shopping centres. One local cafe proprietor expressed fear over the presence of Indigenous youth outside his shop, claiming it was 'bad for business'. However, he did not want to become involved because he feared reprisals in the form of damage to his property. It was also stated that people were afraid for their safety and were becoming 'prisoners in their own homes'.

Reaction to the perceived 'crime wave', coupled with the apparent inability of police to apprehend the offenders, resulted in a small number of residents appointing a 'coordinator' to convene a residents meeting to decide whether or not to form a 'major' vigilante group to deal with the juvenile crime problem (*Townsville Bulletin*, 16 April 1996). There was no attempt to invite members of the Indigenous community to the meeting which was interpreted by Len as being due to a hostile environment:

I don't really know, it's just, you know, a white man thing. I think it's just as simple as that and yet talk to them about this one girl; they're advocating very much for Aborigine tribal law to be brought in.

Attended by 'concerned citizens' and some police officers from the nearby police station, the meeting was held in an atmosphere of anger and hostility towards those who had disrupted the 'peace and quiet' of the neighbourhood. Len remarked that while the police were concerned about the public outrage towards the juvenile crime problem, he was told to refrain from taking direct action in the form of vigilante action:

He (the police officer) was sitting just behind me and he just leaned forward and said 'don't get involved in this mate'. Then one woman asked him; 'What's our rights?' and he said; 'You haven't got any rights, it's as simple as that. You can't do anything about it. You can follow these kids and they might jump into somebody's yard. But you can't go into that yard because you're trespassing'.

The meeting also provided individual victims of crime with a platform to vent their anger at the inadequacy of 'soft' laws, which were perceived as doing little to rectify 'the Aboriginal problem' in the area. One seventy year old described how he was assaulted by the Indigenous girl in his home without any recourse to help from the criminal justice system:

Like, it's been three months since I was assaulted and I still haven't been called up to court. I want to stand up and have my bloody evidence heard so everyone will know what this girl done to me. And this officer got up and said it would surprise him very much if I even got called. He said it's just one of those situations. The bloody kid can stand up in front of the magistrate and the magistrate says you've been a naughty girl, you kicked the shit out of this bloke and I'll give you fifty hours of community service.

The meeting resolved to establish an on-going 'anti crime' group. There were, however, mutterings that 'more needed to be done' and that 'we should take matters into our own hands'. The coordinator of the meeting recalled that:

Yes, I knew that some people wanted to do more, but we couldn't condone violence of any sort. I was aware that some people in the group had gone off to do things on their own... we knew it was happening.

Despite warnings from the local police, members of the local community organised themselves into autonomous 'community groups'. These were comprised mainly of young married men who took turns in patrolling the streets at night and had, on at least one occasion, chased the Indigenous girl and other youths through the streets (*Townsville Bulletin*, 16 April 1996). One group had also searched places where they believed the offenders had stored their stolen belongings. It was claimed that on one occasion former members of the army's SAS patrolled the streets and cornered members of an 'Aboriginal gang'. One local resident described the outcome of this incident:

Vandals that's what they were, vandalising different houses. This bloke waited up the street this night with three of these SAS boys. They just waited in a dark little corner until the kids came up the street. There were ten or fifteen of them involved in this gang. These four gentlemen stepped out, boom, boom, boom; end of story. They jumped back in their car and drove off.

Although such incidents were referred to with great circumspection (given the illegal nature of the alleged action), other respondents talked about several 'young men' who had built a tree house designed for panopticon-like street surveillance. Armed with baseball bats, a 'slab' of beer and a radio the men kept several all-night vigils. On at least two occasions they spotted a small group of youths in the street. They decided to give chase. The problem, however, was that the tree-dwellers were intoxicated by this point and thus unable to scramble down the length of the trunk. Despite such problems, the men persevered with their actions over a number of days. They justified their comic attempts at crime control by a litany of complaints, such as: the criminal justice system was 'soft' on Indigenous youths who knew how to 'get off', and that there was 'little the police could do' because of a lack of officers. They also referred to the 'fact' that the once 'peaceful' suburb had been transformed since the arrival of Indigenous families. The local 'crime problem' was therefore seen as essentially a black problem for which, supposedly, there was little or no answer – at least through the usual official channels.

On another occasion the wives of these men decided to patrol the street in a car. They also spent several nights looking for 'coloured gangs'. On one occasion a group of elderly women were seen shining a powerful torch into the home of the suspected 'ring leader' of an Indigenous 'gang'. This was quickly put to an end by the girl's irate mother who ran out of the house and smashed the windscreen of the car with a lump of wood, resulting in the car-load of women beating a hasty retreat down the street.

Stories such as these circulated around the local area. The press became increasingly interested in the issue and local politicians and 'community representatives' spoke out about the spectre of vigilantism. This was not the first time that vigilante activity had been reported in the Townsville and surrounding area. A few months earlier in a small north Queensland town there was talk of 'racial war' and the emergence of vigilante groups if the family of an offending black youth was not removed from the area (Hil 1997). Around the same time (1996) an 'anti-crime group' had been established in an inner suburb of Townsville to combat the 'juvenile crime problem'. The city mayor had endorsed the group's request for security officers with dogs to patrol the streets. A 'crime prevention forum' was established to address the juvenile 'crime wave' in the city (Hil 1996). The sub-text to much of this reaction was that Indigenous youth were mainly responsible for the spiralling crime rate in the city. Indeed, there had over recent years been countless reports of 'coloured' groups of youth who were offending in various parts of the city (Hil, 1995).

In Conville the police responded to threats of vigilante behaviour by pointing to the illegal nature of such activity. In articles headed 'Vigilante groups not the answer' (*Townsville Sun*, 17 April 1996) and 'Police warn against vigilante action' (*Townsville Bulletin*, 16 April 1996) the Townsville Mayor and senior local police officers counselled the public against vigilantism as a way of combating juvenile crime – although one police officer was said to have no objection to 'vigilance' by residents (*Townsville Bulletin*, 16 April 1996).

It is interesting to note that throughout this period little attention was given to the concerns of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. One community leader did voice her concerns regarding what she perceived to be unwarranted police attention towards Indigenous youth on the streets. She spoke of: '...police who pick on young black people because they appear to be a threat when congregating on the streets' (*Townsville Bulletin*, 23 March 1996).

The latter view, however, proved to be an exception to the rule. Generally, the residents spoke about 'the black crime problem' as if it were an omnipresent social fact. Joe, a retired mechanic, described how he had been forced to leave his last home and move to another suburb due to Indigenous youths consistently congregating outside his house. When asked why he made this decision, he stated:

I'm beating my head against a brick wall. I spent half of the time on the phone ringing the police who would arrive, speak to them and they'd leave. Soon as the car lights disappeared down the road these black kids would be back swearing and yelling out half the night. Me and the other neighbours got to the point of wanting to buy a bloody gun and clean the lot of 'em up once and for all. Politicians, police, you name it; have got no answer to blacks taking over the suburb.

However, Mary, a lone parent and fellow resident, responded to the situation in a more reactive way than Joe did. She spoke of being too afraid to go outside her home at night due to a confrontation she had with three young Indigenous youths in her garage the previous year:

I was on my way out to the garage one night because I work at a take-away shop on the night shift. I went to open the door and found it was partly up. I thought that's strange, I was sure I had closed it that afternoon. Just as I put my hand on the lever the door shot up and these three black shapes came from out the garage and bolted over the back fence. I nearly fell over with fright. From now on, I don't go out in the yard any more. The place is being overrun with feral black kids who'd take the shirt off your back as you slept. This used to be such a nice, quiet suburb when I moved here three years ago.

### *Crime and racialised discourse*

Considerable caution is required when interpreting the above accounts. It would be disingenuous for example, to deny that the respondents were affected by crimes committed by some Indigenous youths, or that they were justifiably seeking some sort of protection. The task here however, is to establish the reasons why those who chose to take action in relation to Indigenous youth *per se*, or indeed why it was that they so easily equated the problem of crime with Indigenous people. Significantly, data from the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care (1997) indicates that non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous youth carried out crimes in the local neighbourhood. And yet, the perceptions of the residents in question suggests a very partial representation of the local crime problem. This fact in itself demands attention. It cannot be explained simply by reference to direct experience since clearly residents would have heard of and even experienced crime by local white youth. The articulation of the crime problem in terms of its essentially racial nature suggests something deeper than a mere reactive interpretation of a highly localised problem. The explanation for the 'racialisation' of the residents' accounts may be attributed to a host of over-arching factors that have their origins in issues of racism, cultural identity, structural inequality and perceptions of 'reversed egalitarianism'. While there is insufficient space to address all of these factors we focus in the remainder of this article on the connected indices of racialisation and reversed egalitarianism, if only because this figured so prominently in the accounts of respondents when talking about why 'aboriginal kids get away with crime'.

For the purposes of this article 'racialisation' refers to a discursive process by which links are drawn between a perceived 'problem' and those 'racial' groups who are apparently responsible for its occurrence. Indeed, references to racial categories such as 'coloured', 'black' and/or 'Aboriginals' signifies a supposed association with an identifiable group and/or a biological and/or cultural predisposition associated with certain sorts of behaviour. Thus, the racialised sub-text for explanations of a crime problem may be linked to particular 'understandings' or ways of knowing how 'they' behave in contrast to 'us' (Beresford & Omaji 1996). For instance, the category of 'black youth' may resonate with particular racialised images and representations of Aboriginality as a problem category, similar to earlier renditions of Indigenous people as a 'nuisance' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission 1997). Thus, Indigenous youth are homogenised as a sub-population of a wider group that is regarded as inherently criminogenic or prone to certain 'anti-social' forms of behaviour. The reference to 'black youth' therefore denotes a population that supposedly poses a direct threat to social order. Such references are grounded in historical and contemporary discourses which effectively collapse various categories together, like Indigenous people, crime, disorder, lawlessness and 'social problems'.

Such discursive linkages may hinge on reductionist notions such as criminogenic predisposition ('that's the way they are') or to certain cultural practices ('lack of appropriate child rearing skills'). In the present study these beliefs of what 'everyone knows' about crime are manifested in a range of complex discursive practices that link Indigenous people (and particularly Indigenous youth) to certain actuarial assumptions about crime (e.g. that crime is 'out of control'). The discursive outcome is a perceived link between a certain category of the population ('Indigenous people') and the general problem of crime. The 'visibility' of these populations (an assumptive position in itself!) and their identification as 'threat' in what were previously 'nice, quiet areas' makes the process of association easier for those seeking a convenient explanation for a crime problem.

While it would be misleading to suggest a conscious, coherent shared identity among the residents – there were significant personal, gender, age and even social class differences among them – there was nonetheless a sense in which they, as ‘white residents’, faced what they considered to be the imminent threat of Indigenous youth. It was the presence of threat and its association with ‘black youth’ that formed the basis upon which an expressed racialised consciousness emerged. The meetings called by a residents’ coordinator, the fact that participants identified themselves as ‘white’ or ‘us’ and talk of ‘black crime’ and ‘Aboriginal gangs’ all contributed to the formation of a radicalised group consciousness. This process was slow, piecemeal and defensive but was expressed in a shared assumptive way with continual discursive references to a general ‘black crime problem’. The ‘unity in difference’, brought about through a shared (though very loosely defined) racial identity (Hall & d’U-Gay 1996) provided the means by which residents could, cautiously at first, talk about ‘aboriginal people’ and ‘black youth’ as a taken-for-granted ‘problem’. For some residents, local and regional history was apparently on their side: they knew, indeed everyone knew, who committed the majority of crimes in Queensland. In other words, the explanations for a local outbreak of black crime dovetailed neatly with entrenched assumptions about the crime-prone and problematic nature of Indigenous youth. Such accounts emerged, we would argue, in the context of general and historically contingent assumptions about Indigenous people as being a nuisance or problem. That is to say, they emerged in a cultural context grounded in particular assumptive views about the essentially criminogenic nature of Indigenous people.

For the residents, the immediate and pressing problem was how to respond to the threat posed by Indigenous youth. Faced with a sense of vulnerability and isolation many residents felt they had to take matters into their ‘own hands’. They did so in the belief that crime was getting ‘out of control’ and that there was little the police could do about it, mainly because the legal system was ineffectual in dealing with young offenders, or there were insufficient numbers of officers on the street, or because police officers were unable or unwilling to confront Indigenous youth. But once the group had come together it became increasingly evident that they not only shared a major characteristic – they were all white – but that the ‘problem’ (Indigenous youth) had to be confronted by them and them alone. There was a distinct sense of the ‘thin white line’ evident in the way residents talked about dealing with the ‘Indigenous problem’. The problem was seen as widespread. One interviewee, for example, referred to a number of anecdotal stories about Indigenous people and crime in Queensland in an attempt to ‘prove’ a growing ‘epidemic’. Other residents concurred silently with such views. No-one really needed to elaborate what everyone already seemed to ‘know’.

The assumption that Indigenous youth were responsible for most crime in the locality and elsewhere was accompanied by a feeling that the justice system was too ‘soft’ with or ‘stacked in favour’ of black offenders. Residents made frequent remarks about how the system was favourably disposed towards black youth and how this reflected the general preference given to Australia’s Indigenous people by successive governments. As one resident put it:

Aboriginal kids seem to get off easier compared to white kids when it comes to the law. I think it’s like that in all areas where the majority of people have to make their own way while Aborigines get massive hand outs by politicians who just want to throw money at the problem and hope that it goes away.

The representation of 'white people' as the 'victims' of 'positive discrimination' was applied to the ways police officers dealt with young Indigenous offenders. It was argued that officers were 'reluctant' to arrest Indigenous youth because they might be accused of being 'racist'. Similarly, others felt that the courts were reluctant to hand out harsh sentences to Indigenous youth. Indeed, the fact that the young Indigenous girl was able to 'roam the streets' for so long (in fact she was in and out of youth custody for several months) seemed to support the contention that there was nothing the 'system' could do to stop her. This sense that Indigenous people were treated more favourably by the state was central to many of the complaints made by participants in and around the vigilante groups. This in turn added to the sense of racial antagonism that seemed to permeate local discourse on a range of matters. Crime as a local issue enabled participants to talk about a range of other concerns in relation to Indigenous people: from housing to health, to education and social welfare. Crime thus appeared to reflect concerns about the way governments dealt with the 'Aboriginal issue', often to the detriment of the 'rest of us'.

### *Conclusion*

This article has focused on the phenomenon of vigilantism in a North Queensland community. It has been argued that 'reactive vigilantism' in this instance took on a racialised form once the 'crime problem' was linked to a wider 'black crime problem' and once participants were self-referenced as a united collectivity. The identification of participants as the 'victims' of crime, as well as residents of a predominantly white suburb, provided the pretext for talk about the supposedly pervasive nature of crime committed by Indigenous youth. A local issue was rapidly grafted onto a more general black crime problem in which communities around Queensland were supposedly besieged by growing levels of lawlessness. Participation in secretive autonomous action came about through a shared understanding that the police were unwilling and/or unable to deal with crimes committed by Indigenous youth. Residents therefore felt they had to take the law into their own hands. We have argued that in order to make sense of the assumptions held by the residents, as well as actions taken by some of them, it is necessary to locate causal discourses in an historical context. Although mindful of attributing unwarranted motives to vigilante members we nonetheless contend that the assumption of a 'black crime problem' is linked to a general discursive tendency to problematise Indigenous people. This tendency has its origins in the racist doctrines associated with colonial domination and with current ideas associated with reverse egalitarianism. Moreover, public perceptions about a perceived increase in crime by Indigenous youth have served to reinforce the schism between sections of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in North Queensland. Arguably, therefore, both historical precedents and contemporary events are precursors for the increase in forms of racialised vigilante activity. While the events in Townsville represent one case study, it is argued that there is growing evidence of the existence of vigilante groups as a means of administering retribution against Indigenous youth. These formations are sporadic and short-lived and their members may adopt different methods of 'vigilance' as a reaction to what they see as a problematic situation. The resurgence of such activity, however, represents a transition to overt and potentially violent expressions of racism which should be of worry to all Australian citizens.



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