

**Ethnic Minorities and Crime in
Australia:
Moral Panic or Meaningful Policy
Responses**

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1. Introduction

Concern about crime and fear of crime appear to be one of the characteristics of the age, not just in Australia but also in all western societies. Reviewing the crime issue in the UK and USA, Schneider and Kitchen (2002: 25) state that: 'Crime and fear of crime are major issues in British and American Societies that help mould our cities and influence the qualities of life in both nations'. Crime and fear of crime have increasingly been linked to immigration and immigrants. In recent years in Australia and Europe the immigrant crime issue has captured media headlines and shaped political discourses and electoral outcomes in an unprecedented way (Collins et al 2000; Collins 2003). Post 9/11 (the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001), the Bali bombing in 2002 and 2005 and 7/7 (the bombings on London's public transport system on 7th July 2005) concern about immigrants as terrorists, the extreme form of crime, has cemented the image of immigrants as perpetrators of crime in public and private discourses. This has reduced the space for positive discourses about immigrant minorities in general and as victims of crime in particular at the very moment that many immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East and those of Islamic faith, have increasingly been victimised following these events. But as Bowling and Phillips (2002: 76) observe, even before these events there has been relatively little attention given to immigrants as victims of crime: "Until recently, the 'race and crime' debate has been preoccupied...by the question of whether people from ethnic minorities are more (or less) likely to commit criminal offences than those of the white majority population...[but] has largely been detached from discussions about ethnic differences in the extent and nature of victimisation and how patterns of offending and victimisation interrelate."

Issues related to immigrants as criminals or victims of crime resonates strongly in Australia because it has a relatively larger and more diverse immigrant population – some 23% of the population – than most western countries (OECD 1998: 31). It is not surprising that the immigrant crime debate has been centred on Sydney, in Australia's largest city which takes about 40 per cent of Australia's annual immigration intake. Indeed, according to a recent report (State Chamber of Commerce (New South Wales) 2005: 9), Sydney has the seventh highest proportion of foreign-born of any city in the world today. Data from the 2001 national census revealed that first generation immigrants accounted for nearly 30 per cent of

Sydney's population of four million while another 28 per cent of the population was second-generation immigrants (Burnley 2001). After those born in the UK, Sydney's largest immigrant groups are those born in China, New Zealand, Vietnam, Lebanon, Italy, Hong Kong, India, Greece, Korea, Fiji and South Africa, though it is important to stress the diversity of the Sydney immigrant population, with some 180 national birthplace groups, so that Sydney truly is the world in one city (Collins and Castillo 1998). Significantly, Sydney is also the main centre of Middle Eastern immigration, with seven out of every ten (107,405 or 72.2 %) of Australia's Lebanese immigrants settling in Sydney (Collins 2005: 190-2). Sydney is thus a good site to explore contemporary issues of immigrant criminality and immigrant victimology in Australia.

The issue of ethnic crime has been of great public concern in Sydney since late 1998 (Collins et al. 2000). In particular, media headlines have emphasized the problems of youth crime and youth gangs operating in south western Sydney (Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales 2003). This paper argues that there is a moral panic (Cohen 1980) about ethnic crime in Sydney – embedded in sensationalist media reporting and opportunistic political responses from across the NSW political spectrum - that has exaggerated the criminality of ethnic minorities. This moral panic has caused distress for many Australians of minority immigrant background who are now tarred with the brush of criminality and, for some, terrorism, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and the Bali and London bombings. This moral panic has reinforced negative stereotypes about minority communities, is reinvigorating racism and prejudice and, as a consequence, is threatening the social cohesion in one of the world's most successful multicultural societies. Moreover, the moral panic about ethnic crime has diverted attention away from the meaningful policy responses that are needed to address matters of crime in particular, and cosmopolitan societies in general.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 looks at the moral panic about ethnic crime in Australia (with a focus on recent events of Middle Eastern crime in Sydney) and in western societies in general. Section 3 critically reviews the criminological evidence about the extent of criminality among ethnic minorities in Australia. Section 4 presents finding

from a survey about immigrant crime among Sydney's ethnic minority communities. Section 5 looks at the neglected issue of immigrants as victims of crime. Section 6 outlines a framework for meaningful policy responses to crime while Section 7 draws some brief conclusions.

2. *Moral Panic and the media*

The supposed links between immigrant minorities and criminal behaviour is a recurring theme in Australian immigration history (Francis 1981; Hazlehurst 1987). This had led to periodic research and inquiry into immigrant crime in the post-1945 decades (Mukherjee 1999). The issue has also periodically attracted media attention and public debate. The 1950s and 1960s were dominated by immigration of Greeks and Italians, and these groups were soon linked to crime in Australia. The 1970s also saw the 'Greek conspiracy case' over alleged Medibank fraud by Greek doctors. The accused were later exonerated, with the police involved found to have used inappropriate investigative methods in the case (Kondos 1992). The now defunct weekly, *The National Times*, reported in 1978 on the drug trade involving Calabrian Italians, as well as Lebanese, Chinese and Turkish drug traffickers. The emergence of Asian immigrants in large numbers in the mid-1970s – for the first time in nearly 100 years, following the abandonment of the 'White Australia Policy' – was accompanied by a fear of Asian crime, particularly associated with the Triads. Media representations of immigrant minorities produce and reproduce stereotypes of violent and criminal communities (Goodall et al. 1994) and the suburbs in which they concentrate are depicted as dangerous and unsafe places (Dreher 2000; Castillo and Hurst 2000).

The issue of immigrant crime has risen to new heights in recent years in Sydney since the fatal stabbing of 14-year-old Korean-born Edward Lee in Punchbowl in October 1998 and, two weeks later, a drive-by shoot up of the Lakemba police station. The recently retired NSW Premier, Bob Carr, and NSW Police Commissioner, Peter Ryan, immediately identified Lebanese gangs with both crimes in media reports. Since then, the terms 'ethnic gangs', 'ethnic youth gangs', 'Middle Eastern gangs', 'Lebanese gangs' and 'immigrant gangs' have recurred with amazing frequency in Sydney media headlines (Ethnic Communities Council of NSW 1999; Collins et al. 2000; Poynting et al. 2004). Since then a

number of global and local events have kept the issue of immigrant crime at the top of the Sydney media hit-parade. These global events include the Twin Towers' hits in 2001, the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005, the occupation of Iraq and the July London bombings this year. The local events include a notorious race-rape case and a number of other criminal events in Sydney (Poynting et al. 2004), a federal election won on anti-refugee politics (Marr and Wilkinson 2003) and a national government that prided itself as being the strongest supporter of the USA in global politics. In this environment, 'Middle Eastern' and 'Arabic' are immigrant identities in Sydney that are increasingly criminalized in recent media and popular discourse. During this period, immigrant minorities have been constructed as criminal with their (inferior/dysfunctional) ethnicity or culture at the same time explaining why they are criminal and why immigrant crime is something to be feared more than other crime (Lupton 1991).

There is a strong international literature on the criminalising of immigrant minorities in many western countries (Tonry ed. 1997; Hawkins ed. 1995; Bowling and Phillips 2002; Schissel and Brooks eds. 2002), particularly in relation to black immigrants in countries like Canada (James 2002; Chan and Mirchandani eds. 2002) and the UK (Gilroy 1987; Cook and Hudson 1993; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 1999; Cathcart 2000). A common theme that emerges from this literature is the social construction of ethnic criminality (Hall et al. 1978; Webster 1997; Henry et al. 1996), linked to the fear of the stranger Other.

Immigrants in Sydney are not only victims of crime in Australia but also victims of a criminalisation discourse. The sensationalist tabloid print and broadcast media play a central role here, as do opportunistic politicians. This can be seen most vividly in a brief review of sensationalist media reportage of "Middle Eastern crime" in Sydney since the late 1990s (Collins et al 2000: 30-54; Poynting 2000; Kennedy 2000; Priest 2004) – including a notorious 'ethnic gang rape' that occurred in Sydney between August 2000 and August 2001 (Poynting et al 2004: 17-22) - the "children overboard" incident immediately prior to the 2001 federal election (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003) and the reportage of events following 9/11 (Poynting et al 2004: 52-78).

Because of the perception that these events have in common the presence of people from what might be broadly identified as a 'Middle Eastern' ancestry, these events have formed the basis of a series of cycles of moral panic (Cohen 1980:9) which have centred around those of Arabic-speaking background and especially, but not exclusively, those of Muslim faith. Such panics have recurred over a much longer time span, often in relation to the (alleged) criminality of Chinese, Italian, Greek and other immigrant groups (Francis 1981; Hazlehurst 1987), though there has been an intensification of these waves since the late 1990s. They have been whipped up by the tabloid press, talkback radio and opportunist politicians, with a subsequent increase in racial attacks on immigrant minorities in public places across Australia. The second half of 2001 saw one such crescendo, leading up to the federal election in November of that year, during which both the refugee crisis – boats carrying refugees from the Middle East were turned away from Australian shores by the Australian navy for the first time in post-war history - and the insecurities caused by international terrorism were exploited by the Liberal-National Coalition government in their successful bid to return to office, against earlier expectations (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003).

The links that are made between these events and the 'perpetrators' involved, however problematic, rest on what might be called 'the Arab Other', a supposedly homogeneous category which includes those of Arabic or Middle Eastern or Muslim background. This is not a singular category, of course: it includes people from quite diverse ancestries and with quite distinct histories. Nevertheless, the media discourse that emerged following these events shows how, via the chains of association, 'Arabic-ness' and Islam and 'Middle-Eastern-ness' are seen to be the same thing and are seen to be essentially and pathologically evil, inhuman, violent and criminal (Poynting 2000; Poynting ed 2004). As a result of these associations, whole communities are made to share the burden of blame. In assembling this Arab Other, the key ideological feature is the systematic 'dehumanising' of those involved, whether they be criminals, terrorists or refugees. Moreover, in this public discourse on Lebanese or Middle Eastern crime in Sydney the accused – mostly second generation immigrants born in Australia – have been robbed of their nationality. They are 'Lebanese' or 'Middle Eastern', and never 'Australian'. With the construction of the 'Arab Other', the

association of criminal and other practices results in the criminalisation of cultural difference, which appears to threaten the social and moral order as much as overtly illegal behaviour.

It is clear that in cosmopolitan societies like Australia, and in its major cities like Sydney, crime will be cosmopolitan and immigrants will be involved in crime. The critical issue is whether some cultures are themselves predisposed to – or significantly over-represented in – criminal activity, a view that is presupposed by much of the media moral panic about ethnic crime in Sydney. As a corollary, the public discourse on immigrant crime in Sydney has equated *immigrant* or *ethnic* with *criminal*. This approach not only robs these immigrants of their Australian identity and shifts the focus of immigrant youth away from being victims of crime to be consoled and reaffirmed to that of perpetrators of crime, to be feared, to be scorned and to be excluded. This also diverts attention away from important policy responses to crime. The criminality of individuals becomes the criminality of cultures. Following this logic, the policy response to such crime is not found in the socio-economics realm of policies to improve social inclusion of immigrant minorities (to provide jobs, education or better living standards) nor in the realm of policing reform (to provide a more multicultural police force and tackle police racism). Rather, the simple solution is to deport the criminals, to stop the further immigration of these (dysfunctional) immigrant minorities and to call on the Imams to control *their* people: Australian society will not take responsibility for these criminals in the same way that it does for other criminals. It is not *our* problem, but *theirs*. In this way the media construction of immigrant criminality creates or supports negative, prejudicial stereotypes about immigrants and immigrant communities that help to reinforce their experience as victims in their host country. This in turn reinforces immigrant's fear of crime and concern for safety. As Bowling and Phillips (2002: 14) argue in relation to the British experience “racist violence has a significant impact on minority communities, leaving them insecure and avoiding many public places for fear of attack”.

In Canada (Henry and Bjornson 1999; Sacco 2000; James 2002; Wortley 2002) and Europe (Gilroy 1987; Webster 2001; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 1999) the role of the media in constructing racial stereotypes of immigrant criminality has attracted increasing attention. This is particularly the case since politicians across the political

spectrum have opportunistically played on immigrant law and order and illegal immigrant issues in their election campaigns in Australia (Collins et al. 2000; Marr and Wilkinson 2003) and many European countries (Collins 2003) in recent years. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. As Bowling and Phillips (2002: 79) put it, “the media and political reactions to the public disorders [in Britain] of the late 1970s and 1980s also contributed significantly to popular understandings of black people as disorderly and criminal”. Moreover, this media ‘loudness’ about the criminality of immigrant minorities is contracted to relative media ‘deafness’ about the victimology of the same immigrant minorities. Reporting on a study of the Toronto, Canada, media Wortley (2002: 64) concludes that “the media are much more likely to communicate the race of criminal offenders than the race of crime victims”. This issue will be taken up later in this paper. As Duncan Campbell, then Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, wrote (in Hazelhurst 1990): “In the past a rather gloomy picture of close-knit migrant communities, particularly in urban or industrial areas, has been painted. Biased media reporting and prejudice in wider society have depicted minority group enclaves as suffering from crime, disorder and inter-cultural conflict”.

3. *Criminological data*

Despite the controversy that surrounds the issue of ethnic or immigrant crime in Australia and elsewhere, there has been surprisingly little solid research on the subject. There are three main ways that criminologists construct a picture of the extent of crime in a society: arrest or imprisonment statistics; victim reports of crime; and self-reports of offences (McCord et al. 2001: 26). The only reliable set of published Australian data on immigrant criminality is based on imprisonment rates by birthplace. This data does show that immigrants of certain birthplace groups – Lebanese (1.6 per 1,000 of population), Vietnamese (2.7) and New Zealanders (1.6) - are over-represented in the criminal justice system while other groups of immigrants – those born in Italy (0.6), Greece (0.5) and the UK and Eire - (0.6) are under-represented when compared to the Australian born (=1) (Mukherjee 1999: 8).

But this data is very inadequate if the intention is to form a rigorous judgment on the criminality of immigrants in Australia. First, as Mukherjee (1999: 4) points out, only one in

ten crimes are solved. This is challenged by Australian data for the 2004 International Crime Victimization Survey which found much higher rates of reportage of crime to police: from 94 per cent of motor vehicle thefts to 37 per cent of assaults and threats (Johnson 2005: xii). Nevertheless it can be concluded that imprisonment data refers only to the tip of the crime iceberg. Second, birthplace does not equate with ethnicity: a person born in Malaysia, for example, might be of Chinese, Indian or Malaysian background. Third, police discretion mediates between criminal acts that come to police notice and the extent to which these acts and their perpetrators are taken further into the criminal justice system. A suspect's ethnicity does make a difference (Keith and Murji 1993). As Bowling and Phillips (2002: 243) argue for the UK: "[B]y the end of the criminal justice process there is an undeniable disproportionate number of people from ethnic minorities who had been stopped 'under suspicion' by police, arrested and imprisoned." This provides space for police and/or community racism to influence arrest and imprisonment rates in countries such as Australia (Chan 1994, 1997), Canada (Henry and Bjornson 1999; Wortley 2001) and the United Kingdom (Holdaway 1996; Phillips and Brown 1998). Hence the arrest data itself is flawed, not only because for some crime no arrests are made and for others several people may be arrested who may or may not have committed the crime, but also because "[a]rrests also depend on a number of factors other than overall crime levels, including the policies of particular police agencies; the co-operation of [the] victim; the skill of the perpetrator; and the age, sex, race, and social class of the suspect" (McCord et al. 2001: 27).

Nevertheless, it is clear that in a multicultural society such as Australia and in cosmopolitan cities such as Sydney criminals will come from all birthplace and ethnic backgrounds. What is not clear is whether certain immigrant groups are more criminal than others and, if so, what are the reasons for this. When immigrant minorities do have higher rates of incarceration than non-immigrants it is also possible that it is the relative socio-economic disadvantage of immigrant minorities compared to the majority white population - as occurs in Australia (Collins 2000) and other countries such as the UK (Solomos 1993; Skellington 1996) and Canada (Henry et al. 2000; Satzewich ed. 1998) - rather than the supposed dysfunctional ethnic or cultural traits of immigrants, that is the explanation. This is more than an academic debate: it impacts on the policy responses to crime. One explanation leads to a

mobilization to stop or reduce the immigration of minorities, the other to policies to reduce the socio-economic disadvantage of immigrant minorities. This latter point is conveniently ignored in much media discourse on immigrant criminality in Sydney (Henry and Bjornson 1999; Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales 2003), an issue explored in more detail later in this article.

4. Sydney survey

The survey was of 825 people (380 adults and 445 youth) conducted in 2001 – before 9/11 - after a pilot survey in late 2000 in the Canterbury Local Government Area (LGA). The survey sought information on the perceptions and experiences of crime and safety issues, particularly youth crime, in Sydney. The survey was conducted in a number of LGAs in south western Sydney: Hurstville, Canterbury, Bankstown, Fairfield, Rockdale, Liverpool, Auburn and Bankstown. Some of these areas – particularly Canterbury, Bankstown and Fairfield LGAs - have been at the centre of the ethnic crime debate in Sydney. There were also the areas where our industry partners – mainly local government and ethnic community organisations – were located. In addition, we interviewed a number of people (24 adults and 10 youth) from Sydney's North Shore LGAs for a point of comparison. A snowballing or networking methodology was used to select those interviewed within a stratified sample designed to get a wide range of NESB birthplace groups, a control sample and an equal gender spread across youth and adults. The survey was designed to obtain 80 per cent of respondents from a non-English speaking background (NESB), about half adults and half youth, half male and half female.

Adults from 21 different birthplace groups were surveyed, as were youth from 24 different birthplace groups. The largest birthplace groups of those surveyed were born in Lebanon (64), Vietnam (70), Greece (28), Macedonia (36), Egypt (23) and China (29). Over half of the youth surveyed (241) were born in Australia, that is, were second-generation immigrants. Other than English, Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Greek and Macedonian were the most frequent languages spoken at home by the adult sample in Sydney. English is spoken at home by half of our youth sample in Sydney, while the others mainly speak Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Greek and Macedonian at home. A control sample of about 20 per cent of third-

or later-generation Australians and immigrants from an English-speaking background was also sought: 63 adults who were third- or later-generation Australian born, 72 youth with an Australian-born mother and 70 youth with an Australian-born father were included for this purpose. Most of the interviews with adults were conducted in languages other than English. This was in order to tap the views of immigrant Sydney-siders who are at the centre of this ethnic crime storm yet whose voices go unnoticed in most English-based opinion polls and other surveying.

Some of the *major findings of this phase of the research* project are:

- Concern about crime is high in south western Sydney among immigrant minorities and the dominant cultural majority; adults are more fearful of crime than youth.
- Three-quarters of males and two-thirds of females felt safe living in their local area, with young people feeling safer than adults.
- Immigrant youth are both engaged in criminal activity (the minority) and are victims of criminal activity (the majority). But in a cosmopolitan, multicultural city like Sydney, where the research was conducted, crime is cosmopolitan.
- Individuals are criminals, not cultures or ethnicities. Despite the moral panic about ethnic youth crime in Sydney, only a small proportion of any ethnic group is criminal.
- Many youth, including those of minority ethnic background, 'hang out' with friends in public spaces, but most of these friendship groupings are not gangs.
- Youth and adults perceive public transport nodes as key points where they fear for their safety.
- About half of those surveyed thought that criminal gangs and youth gangs were associated with particular ethnic groups, while one-half disagreed with this proposition. Those who linked youth and criminal gangs to specific ethnic groups nominated 'Lebanese, Middle Eastern or Arabic', 'Asian, Chinese or Vietnamese' and 'Pacific Islander or Tongan' as the ethnic groups linked to criminal and youth gangs.

- Only one in ten of the youth respondents said that the friendship group that they hang around with in public spaces was a gang. This suggests that there is an exaggeration in the public mind about the number of ethnic gangs and youth gangs. This does not deny that there are criminal and youth gangs that have ethnicity as the common denominator, but it does suggest that all youth gathered together in public spaces such as shopping malls are not members of youth gangs.
- The majority thought that police were doing a ‘good job’ responding to crime in general and criminal and youth gangs in particular.
- Two-thirds of young people surveyed thought that police picked on groups of young people and named ‘Lebanese, Middle Eastern or Arabic’, ‘Asian, Chinese or Vietnamese’ and ‘Pacific Islander or Tongan’ as the ethnic groups that police picked on most.
- While it is a minority of any ethnic group that commit crime, the moral panic about ethnic crime in NSW has shifted the discourse from the criminality of individuals to the criminality of cultures.

5. *Immigrants as Victims of Crime*

The other side of the coin of crime is the people who are victims of this criminal behaviour. There is extensive data on victims of crime in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002: 31-9). Data of recorded crime statistics suggests that over one million people - or 5 per cent of the population - are victims of crime each year. This varies according to the type of crime: highest for crime against property (6 in every 100 persons) but much lower for crimes against the person (one in every 100 persons) (Grant et al. 2002: 282). Whilst the discourse on crime often paints immigrants as the perpetrators and villains, it should be remembered that many immigrants are themselves the victims of crime. Research in the United Kingdom suggests that ethnic minorities generally have a greater risk of criminal victimisation (Bowling and Phillips 2002: 89).

However the Australian data does not generally distinguish between immigrants and non-immigrants. One recent exception is the Australian data for the 2004 International Crime

Victimisation Survey (Johnson 2005). Compiled from a random sample of 7000 adults (16 years and older), 25 per cent of those surveyed were born overseas, a rate comparable to the proportion of first-generation immigrants in the Australian population. The majority (40%) of immigrants surveyed were born in Southeast Asia while just under one in four (24%) were born in the Middle East (Johnson 2005: 4). The survey does not support the UK research that suggests that immigrant minorities are more likely to be victims of crime. The survey found that when considering the risk of personal victimisation in general, speaking a language other than English at home was not significant when other variables were controlled, while the risk of being a victim of assault or threat was highest among those who speak only English at home (Johnson 2005: 18). The survey did find, however, that when looking at fear of crime, “those who speak a language other than English at home report higher levels of fear” (Johnson 2005: 34). The sampling methodology employed in the survey constrains this survey’s ability to assess victimisation of Middle Eastern immigrants in particular. Rather than using random direct dialling to survey immigrants – as was used for non-immigrants – the survey employed a surname-based approach “of known Vietnamese or Middle Eastern surnames from the White Pages of the telephone book” (Johnson 2005: 58). Telephone calls led to appointments for interviews that were conducted in seven languages other than English. One problem with this was that “about half of Arabic sounding surnames were actually Pakistani, Indian or another nationality” leading to a response rate for the Middle East sample of only 36 per cent (Johnson 2005: 58). Moreover, the survey did not specifically investigate victims of race crime or hate crime, a category where immigrant minorities are generally the target.

The Sydney survey explored a number of perceptions about, and experiences of, crime. It revealed that immigrants were both perpetrators of crime and victims of crime, and that the fear of crime was strongly present in the immigrant community. It also explored perceptions of the link between youth gangs and criminal gangs and different immigrant groups and perceptions of police victimisation of immigrant youth.

Of most concern here are the findings about immigrant victimology. Respondents were asked: “Have you been a victim of crime?” and, if so, to indicate the nature of these crimes.

Multiple responses were permitted. Burglary (167 reports) and car theft (121 reports) are the crimes of which most adults surveyed in Sydney had been victims. These far outweigh the other experiences of crime among adults surveyed: 47 adults had been victims of street theft, 38 were victims of violent assault, while eight adults reported being a victim of sexual assault.

We asked a similar question of the youth surveyed. Youth experience matches that of the adult sample in that burglary (145 reports) and car theft (87 reports) are the most common criminal experiences that youth interviewed for our study had experienced as victims of crime. Importantly, however, youth also reported a higher incidence of being victims of violent assaults (76 reports), street theft (62 reports) and sexual assault (30 reports) than adults. Moreover, the incidence of sexual assault is much higher for youth (mainly girls) than for adults. These findings indicate that a surprisingly high number of respondents had personal experiences of crime, although most of this is related to theft of cars or property. Thus, whilst youth are often portrayed as perpetrators of crimes, they are the victims of violent assaults as well.

Concern about crime generates a fear that impacts on the daily decisions that people make about what they do and where they go in the local area. As such it is a form of (vicarious) victimisation of crime. As James and Graycar (2002: 249) argue, “those who are vicariously victimized, like those who have been directly victimized, may be said to experience the costs of crime”. Given these reports of criminal victimization it is not surprising to see that the majority of immigrants – adults and youth - surveyed in Sydney were actually concerned about crime. Of the adults surveyed, most (63%) were ‘very concerned’ about crime, with another 25 per cent ‘concerned’ and only 12 per cent of those adults surveyed responded that they were ‘mildly concerned’ or ‘not concerned’ at all about crime. In contrast, only a minority of youth (21%) reported that they were ‘very concerned’ about crime, with another 41 per cent ‘concerned’, 31 per cent ‘mildly concerned’ and 7 per cent ‘not concerned’ at all about crime. Whilst the concern of youth about crime is decidedly less than for adults surveyed, nevertheless about two in three youth surveyed were either very concerned or concerned about crime. This supports other Australian research which asserts that “despite

the low victimisation rates, older people are nevertheless disproportionately fearful of crime” (James and Graycar 2002: 249).

There is no doubt that ethnic, religious or geopolitical conflicts on a global scale do reverberate in cosmopolitan cities like Sydney. A decade before the terrorist attacks on the twin-towers in New York, following Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, US forces under President George Bush Senior and allies, including Australian troops, were engaged in the first Gulf War. One consequence of this event was that Australians of a Muslim and/or Arab background were subject to extensive racial vilification abuse and physical attacks (HREOC 1991). A report by the Committee on Discrimination Against Arab Australians (1992), documented racist incidents against Arabs and Muslims for the period November 1990 to July 1991. Many families reported harassment at their homes and in the streets, shopping centres, schools and communities. Many women wearing the hijab reported harassment by passing cars and in parking lots. Physical violence was also widespread, with reports of Arabs being spat at or incurring physical injury, including women who had their hijab pulled or torn. In one incident, a car was deliberately run into and damaged, while in another an Arab man died of a heart attack after being racially harassed by a group of teenagers. Widespread property damage was also reported. A Muslim school and restaurant in Perth, Western Australia were subject to arson attacks after threatening phone calls and in other homes and restaurants broken windows and graffiti were common. Many mosques and offices of Arab and Muslim organisations were attacked repeatedly while staff received threatening phone calls and mail threats. One Islamic Centre in an outer Sydney suburb was fire-bombed in January 1991.

Given this history, immediately following the events of 9/11, the NSW Premier, Bob Carr, and the Chairman of the *Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW*, (CRC) Stepan Kerkyasharian, and ethnic community leaders were concerned about the possibility of an escalation of violence and anger directed to Arabs and Muslims living in Sydney. They had a right to be concerned. The CRC responded immediately with the establishment of a Hot Line from 13 September to November 2001, on which the short-term community relations impact of these events could be recorded, and responses thereby developed.

Initially a 24 hour Arabic hotline was set up and from 14 November 2001 a Punjabi language line was open from 5pm – 9pm. The CRC Hotline log sheets asked the CRC telephonist to circle yes/no to the question ‘is the caller the victim of the incident’. Data from this Hot Line provides evidence that there were a significant number of incidents of verbal abuse and physical attacks on members of the Sydney cosmopolitan community. While this was mostly directed at Australians visibly of a Muslim or Arabs background, it was not confined to these groups with Australians of the Sikh religion also reporting abuse and violence.

There were seven categories of attack or assault: physical assault; verbal assault; sexual assault; threat; racial discrimination or harassment; damage to property; and media attack. The most threatening incidents were those of physical or sexual assault (31 incidents, 17.3%). The most commonly reported incident was a verbal assault in a public space (65 incidents, 56%), followed by racial discrimination or harassment, typically in the media (33 incidents, 22.6%) and then a physical assault in a public space (30 incidents, 16.9%).

These incidents were reported affecting children, women, men, young people and the elderly. In some incidents age and gender were not applicable, as in damage to property, or were not stated by the caller. Half of all victims were female, and 44.4%, were male. Seven in ten victims were adults. The largest language groups to use the hotline were Arabic, with 130, or 52.4% of calls, and English, with 86, or 34.7% of calls and Punjabi with 7, or 2.8%, of calls. At first glance only seventy-four, or 29.8% of the victims, identified as Muslim, but on closer examination of the transcriptions of the call the religion of 128 callers was identified. Of these, the overwhelming majority (88) were Muslim; 37 were Sikh; 1 Jewish; and 1 Christian. In addition, one caller was identified simply as religious. The religion of 98 callers was not identified. It is also important to explore the spatial dimensions within Sydney of this experience as a victim of assault or abuse locations where an incident may have occurred. Almost half (47.2%) of all incidents occurred in a public space, including in or near shops and shopping centres and on the road or while driving. The next most common location for incidents reported to the CRC Hotline was in the victim’s residence or neighbourhood (15.3%), followed by incidents in the media (13.7%).

Sixteen incidents of damage to property were reported to the CRC Hotline during September – November 2001 (6.5% of all incidents). Damage to property was reported against family homes (56.3%), places of worship (25%) and in public spaces (12.5%). Callers reported attacks on property including arson. In some instances physical assault and damage to property were combined. The majority of reported threats (63.6%) were against females. Threats were reported against all age groups: adults (69.7%), adolescents (18.2%), children (6.1%) and the elderly (3%).

Another insight into the impact post 9/11 on Arab and Muslim Australians and the extent to which many were victims of racial violence and abuse come from a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) large national consultation on the impact on Australian Muslims arising out of the events of September 11 and the bombing in Bali in October 2002. The HREOC consultations included group discussions with 1423 Arab and Muslim Australians and conducted an audit of 100 local and state government groups and community organisations. The report of the consultations, *Isma-Listen* (HREOC 2004) found that the majority of Muslims consulted had experienced escalating prejudice because of their race or religion as a result of the events in New York and Bali. They reported experiences that ranged from “offensive remarks about race or religion to physical violence” (HREOC 2004: 2). The *Isma-Listen* report summarised some dimensions of the extent of discrimination, vilification and prejudice in the aftermath of September 11:

The Australian Arabic Council recorded a twenty-fold rise in reports of discrimination and vilification of Arab Australians in the month after 11 September 2001. The Muslim Women's Association of South Australia received a 'significant number of reported incidents, specifically of discrimination and harassment against Muslims', most involving offensive verbal abuse of women. The Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association in Sydney also reported a 'phenomenal' increase in both discrimination and vilification reports (HREOC 2004: 43).

The report outlines anecdotal reports of the extent of discrimination, vilification and prejudice experience by Arabs in Australia. It noted that “people readily identifiable as Muslim because of their dress or appearance were particular targets of racist violence and abuse” and that “Muslim women who wear the hijab, niqab or chador have been especially at risk” (HREOC 2004: 45). Physical attacks, threats of violence and attempted assaults were

widely reported to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. In addition, there were a number of incidents of vandalism on what was identifiably the property of Muslim organizations or individuals, with one mosque in Queensland fire bombed and burnt to the ground (HREOC 2004: 49). These incidents were reported as having occurred on the street, at home, in private and public transport, in shops and shopping malls, at school, college and university and at work.

6. *Meaningful Policy responses*

One response to immigrant crime is to criminalize the immigrant minority communities most likely to be criminals and to stop future immigration from these sources. Proponents of this response, including the loudest advocates of the moral panic approach to immigrant crime, generally add the importance of ending Australian's multiculturalism policy. The intention of this paper has been to argue against this response on a number of grounds. First, the data does not support the view that some immigrant minority communities in Australia are more criminal than others. The data collection is conceptually flawed and intermediated by police racism so as to not allow any clear cut conclusion to be supported. Second, the response of politicians who draw political oxygen from this moral panic about ethnic crime and ethnic criminal gangs is asymmetrical to the way that other crime is responded to. This, like the first approach, merely constructs immigrant communities as a whole as criminal and tends to reinforce prejudicial stereotypes about immigrant and religious minorities in Australia, not helpful to the long term social cohesion of one of the worlds most multicultural societies as recent events in Paris so blatantly highlight. The third problem with the moral panic to immigrant crime is that it directs attention, research and resources away from the policy responses that need to be introduced to respond to the reality that criminals come from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including immigrants and non-immigrants alike.

There are a number of areas of policy responses to ethnic crime and ethnic youth crime that emerge from a rejection of the cultural/ethnicity focus on crime committed by immigrant minorities and a replacement of a focus that is individual and socio-economically based. I do not have space to develop these at length in this paper, so summarize them below.

First **jobs** are critical. Immigrant minorities, including immigrant youth, have higher rates of unemployment than average. This is partly a factor of where they live: the western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne, the poorer suburbs of Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane. Take the Macquarie Fields riots in south-western Sydney in early March 2005 when youth went on a rampage for days burning cars and confronting police and the fire brigade. The conflict was centred on the Glenquarie housing estate, a part of Macquarie Fields and home to 4,500 people. At a time when the Sydney average unemployment rate was about 6%, the unemployment rate in the Glenquarie housing estate was 25.5%, and for youth it exceeded 35%. For those in single parent households the unemployment rate was 52% (*The Australian*, “Bad Lands”, March 1 2005, p. 11). In the northwestern suburbs of Paris, where Black Muslim youth have been rioting for the past week, with thousands of cars burnt and confrontation with police and authorities a nightly occurrence, the unemployment rate for youth is 50% (Emma-Kate Symons, “Paris burns over generations of neglect”, *The Australian*, 7 November 2005, p. 15). Creating jobs for minority immigrant youth is critical not just to reducing crime but to achieving social cohesion and reducing social cohesion.

A related point is that **education** is a key area for policy intervention. In the Glenquarie housing estate only 17% of the population has completed the HSC (NSW’s tertiary entrance exam at year 12) and fewer (12%) have post-secondary education qualifications. For Macquarie Fields as a whole, 28% of the population has completed the HSC, compared to the Sydney average of 44% (*The Australian*, “Bad Lands”, March 1 2005, p. 11). Strategies to keep at-risk kids at school will pay great dividends later. Experience in school linked to post-school labour market experience. Schools as places of learning that have the potential to promote social justice outcomes. They are places where community relations and prejudices both appear and can be overcome. Schooling outcomes linked to youth crime and anti-social behaviour in schools and in the community.

Another related aspect concerns **urban renewal** and **public housing**. These are spatial dimensions of general inequality in Australian society in general and Australian cities in particular. The areas where many immigrant minorities concentrate are often the poorest suburbs where public and private sector amenities are very scarce. Public housing is

becoming scarcer in Australian cities and regional towns and the public sector systematically downsized. To invest in crime prevention requires much more than more police on the beat: it requires an investment into community building and resources in Australia's most disadvantaged suburbs and regional and rural areas. A corollary of this argument is that investment is required to ensure that **public space** is available for youth to gather and for recreation and other sub-cultural needs of contemporary Australian youth. They have a right to access public space, yet as a society we under-invest in public investment in spaces for youth. At the same time the private sector builds shopping malls that are cathedrals to the consumer culture that youth worship yet do not provide space for them there and investment on security guards who spend most of their time trying to exclude youth from gathering within.

Policing is an important area of policy response. No nation has yet got policing of multicultural societies right. Racist police have been exposed in Canada, UK, Europe and Australia (Holdaway 1996; Chan 1997; Chan and Mirchandani eds. 2002). More needs to be done of the education and training front about cultural and religious diversity, while the police force still does not reflect the cultural diversity of the boarder society.

The **media** is a broad church and very diversified. Nevertheless the conclusion is inescapable that sensationalist elements of the media (tabloid print media, the shock-jocks who rule the air-waves and ratings-driven current affairs and news television) play a role in generating a moral panic about ethnic crime that exaggerates the situation and in creating negative racial stereotypes about many immigrant and religious minorities.

Social justice is critical to crime responses. In the 1992 LA riots the blacks and Latinos burning cars and buildings were economically and politically disenfranchised in a society where the safety net barely exists. The lesson from LA in 1992 and Paris in 2005 is not that ethnic diversity will lead to social conflict but that ethnic diversity without a strong safety net and accompanying programs and services to reduce disadvantage and social exclusion is a recipe for social conflict. Unfortunately Australia is moving away from strong safety net and

welfare provisions, putting social cohesion at risk as the society becomes more unequal and, apparently, less caring about the have-nots, blaming them for their circumstances.

Finally, **community relations** is another important area of policy. The youth rioting in Paris today are third generation Muslim immigrants from northern Africa. They feel excluded from their society. The Lebanese and Muslim youth at the centre of Sydney's ethnic crime debate are never referred to as Australians in the media discourse about ethnic crime, yet most are Australian-born. Strategies for social inclusion of these youth are as critical as investment in ASIO and security forces in the struggle against international terrorism.

7. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that popular perceptions about ethnic crime and ethnic criminal gangs in Australia are over-exaggerated and that the fear of crime - about two in three of the youth and adults in the Sydney survey were concerned or very concerned about crime - is disproportionate to the reality of crime. This concern about ethnic crime and ethnic gangs is socially constructed, with the sensationalist and racialised media playing a key role in this social construction. This media has repeated, in very large and bold headline type, that ethnic gangs have been a critical part of the crime scene in Sydney over the past five years.

That is not to say that Australians of ethnic minority do not commit crimes, or that there are no ethnic criminal gangs operating in Australia today. Criminal gangs do undertake significant criminal activities in Australia – exactly how significant remains unknown – and governments, police, the public and the media have every right to be concerned about this activity. Moreover, the composition of gangs reflects the changing composition of Australian society: in a cosmopolitan society so dependent of diverse patterns of immigration, as Australian and Sydney have over the past fifty years, those involved in criminal activities, either as individuals or as part of gangs, will come from all cultural backgrounds. However, the intersection of socio-economic disadvantage with gang and criminal activity suggests that those immigrant or ethnic groups most disadvantaged (read Lebanese, Vietnamese, Turkish, Pacific Islanders) are likely to be involved in gang activity. We also know that the solidarity

that binds criminal gangs together and provides the critical element of trust can often be a common experience as a cultural minority from a particular ethnic background. But that does not mean that there is an automatic link between ethnicity and criminality.

We do know that fear of crime is disproportionate to experiences of actual crime. It is only a minority of youth of Asian, Middle-Eastern and Pacific Islander background who are involved in youth and criminal gangs, and that youth and criminal gangs are not the preserve of youth of Asian, Middle-Eastern and Pacific Islander background. Moreover, I have argued that it is important view the ethnic crime and gang phenomenon in Sydney with greater complexity than appears in most media reportage. In particular, I argue that it is important to distinguish between organised criminal gangs, youth gangs and friendship networks of youth or 'social gangs'. In all instances, common ethnicity may be the bond that unites gang members, though our research suggests that so-called youth gangs are more likely to be multicultural than monocultural and that the links are more often to be going to the same school, playing in the same sporting team or liking the same music. If our research has one strong finding it is that there is great confusion over the nature of youth gangs, leading to collective social behaviour of youth in public places being excessively construed in the media and in public perceptions as constituting criminal youth gangs. The result is that youth gangs are seen everywhere that youth gather together in public in some numbers. This conflation leads to a confusion that exaggerates the incidence of, and the problem of, youth gangs in Sydney. This will certainly lead to increased concern about youth gangs, particularly amongst older people, but will certainly not help that much in our understandings of youth gang behaviour or help in policy responses – including policing- to it.

In reviewing the panic about street gangs in the USA and assessing the evidence, McCorkle and Miethe (2002: 217) conclude that “gang members have been portrayed as modern day “folk devils” in order to sell papers, attract viewers, increase police payrolls, secure federal funds and win elections”. It appears that they had their crystal ball firmly linked to the myths and realities that have accompanied the hysteria about ethnic gangs in Sydney over the past five years.

The great danger of the current moral panic about ethnic criminal gangs in Sydney is that the criminality of a *few* begins to be portrayed as a criminality of a *culture*. This leads to the negative stereotyping of many of Sydney's diverse immigrant cultures. It also leads to the possibility that we respond to, analyze and portray ethnic youth crime in Sydney in a very different way to that response we have to crime committed by gangs of youth of the majority Anglo-Celtic background. When considered with similar responses to organised criminal gangs, this process leads inevitably to the *racialisation* of the criminal gang problem in Sydney. If this is the case—and there is strong evidence in Sydney that this has been the case for the past four years—then we put at risk an accurate understanding of the nature, extent and dynamics of the crime issue in Sydney. Even more alarmingly, if we continue to reinforce the racialisation of the youth gang issue in the discourses, policies and practices of Sydney's media, police and governments, the social cohesion of one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities is put in jeopardy.

There is a final point to be made in conclusion of this research report. The moral panic about *ethnic* youth crime puts emphasis on the causes of crime as cultural. Such an emphasis puts at risk the ability of policy responses to deal adequately with the issue. As we have outlined in this chapter, the policy responses to youth crime must be very broad in scope. They cover policies related to socio-economic disadvantage, including the rebuilding of, and reinvestment in, disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They include policies related to improving the educational outcomes of youth at risk and of improving the link between school and the labour market – the school to work transition – for disadvantaged youth. Other policies related to greater investment in public infrastructure around public transport and public spaces are also required. Key here is the provision in urban planning, including the development of shopping malls, of space for youth to gather and to to conduct leisure, sport and recreation. Media organisations also have a responsibility to steer away from sensationalist reporting that might sell papers but that will increase anxiety in the community about crime and safety. Finally, policies related to policing and to gendered nature of youth culture are also critical to the mix of policies that are required to effectively deal with the very worrying public concern about youth crime and safety in public spaces that youth frequent.

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