



**POLICING PARTNERSHIP IN A MULTICULTURAL
AUSTRALIA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES: AN
AUSTRALIAN ARABIC PERSPECTIVE**

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The Australian Arabic Council (AAC) has a long-standing history of active involvement in policing issues. An outspoken advocate of community partnerships, the AAC was instrumental in initiating the discussion on a number of issues such as ethnic descriptors, the link between crime and ethnicity, the development of national and state racial vilification legislation, and the role of police in addressing issues of racism.

We worked very closely with Police during times of crises such as the Gulf war period, the Oklahoma bombing and more recently the horrific events of September the 11th.

The consequences of such events have been devastating for our community, which has already been identified as one of the four most vilified “ethnic” groups in Australia. This is due to the link the media immediately and consistently draws, between the local community and the perpetrators of these acts of terror.

By working in partnership with Police, we have been able to be proactive in formulating effective strategies to reduce the impact of incidents of racial violence directed at the community. Due to the time restraints today, I will briefly outline some of the important issue in policing partnerships with diverse groups as identified by the Australian Arabic Council

Ethnic Descriptors

During our experience we have found that one of the more controversial elements of policing, “ethnic” communities is the use of ethnic descriptors, and how this leads to the victimisation of an entire community. The AAC played a significant role in persuading the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau to first review the categories used by police to describe suspects to the media. After a long process four descriptors were decided on: Asian, Caucasian, Aboriginal and “Other” Appearance. Terms such as “Middle Eastern appearance” were considered redundant and it was recommended all states cease from using such irrelevant descriptors.

Unfortunately not all states adopted these recommendations. We find it ironic that such description can be rendered *useless* in one state but *useful* in another.

It is fundamental to positive partnerships that ethnic descriptors are eliminated all together, Australia-wide. Terms such as "Middle Eastern appearance", or “Middle Eastern looking” suspect, or “Arab looking” suspect, are not only misleading and inaccurate, but often inadvertently lead to the victimisation of individuals and entire communities.

How can people from over 20 different countries share one homogenous physical appearance?

The description is fundamentally racist. The image of a “Middle Eastern” person doesn’t exist in reality, but rather comes from Hollywood stereotypes of the “enemy” the “Arab” villain.

With the advent of sophisticated photo fit images, there is no need for subjective ethnic descriptors; as photo-fits and detailed description should be sufficient *objective* information.

These descriptors have further ramifications for the local Arabic community.

When ethnic descriptors are used to describe offenders to the media, a witch-hunt often develops. The community is portrayed as synonymous with criminal activity. Whilst this is mainly due to the sensationalism of our popular media, it is given legitimacy by the initial identification of the suspect as “Middle Eastern”.

We have seen this in the past few months where the demonisation of asylum seekers, the linking of crime and ethnicity in NSW, and the recent events of September the 11th have resulted in a dramatic rise in vilification of those who are *perceived* to be of Middle Eastern origin.

“Arab looking” suspects were blamed for the Oklahoma bombing and the Russell Street bombing. The actual perpetrators had no “Middle Eastern” connections. This assumption surely impeded the search for the criminals whilst causing undue trauma for those communities that fitted the “description”.

Does anyone offer an apology or compensation to the victims who were collectively incriminated in the process, or consider the long-term negative impact on an entire community? Of course not.

We are particularly concerned about the situation in NSW, where seven ethnic groupings have been retained by police for use in the media. This reliance on “ethnic descriptors” has manifested in recent events, where the perpetrators of certain criminal activity were referred to as “Lebanese gangs“. This attracted extensive media coverage and the NSW community was subjected to an increase in both vilification and police scrutiny.

This situation seems symptomatic of the relationship between police and the Arabic community in Sydney, where communication is strained and the problems are somewhat more significant than found in other state capitals. Whilst the tense relationship cannot be held entirely responsible, the behaviour of police, media and leaders in emphasising the ethnic background of *certain* perpetrators has contributed to the negative situation.

The “Culture Cop Out”

Many NSW political and community leaders including Premier Carr and Commissioner Ryan have insisted on the use of the term “Lebanese Gangs” and relied on the “culture cop out” when referring to apparent “gang” related crime. The radio “shock jocks” have had a field day with these comments.

In the resulting hysteria about “Lebanese gangs”, we find the teenagers are born and raised in Australia. They are “Australians”. They are criminals and should be treated as such with the full force of the law; not because they are of Lebanese origin but because they are criminals.

The notion that crime could have its roots in ethnicity is an absurd one. By pretending that the crime has its roots in another place and another time, it shifts the onus onto the culture as both the cause and the solution. It seems more convenient to attribute the crime to the culture, and make cultural leaders assume primary responsibility.

We do not demand such justifications from the wider community when individuals commit crimes. When the perpetrator was Martin Bryant, his “ethnicity” or “cultural background” was never referred to, or held responsible for his heinous crimes. Indeed, how would we react if people overseas were to equate all Anglo-Saxon Australians with mass murderers because of the actions of an individual?

This insistence on the “culture cop out” and ethnic descriptors is often justified by stating that it is necessary for police to apprehend criminals. If we were to accept this argument, then there are many other *measures* which could be justified in assisting police to apprehend suspects despite their impact on our civil liberties.

Solutions?

So what measures and solutions can we look at to address issues of racism and policing within our multicultural Australia . How can we counter the impact of the use of ethnic descriptors and the “culture cop-out” on relationships between police and the community? As well as eliminating all ethnic descriptors and cultural references, there are several measures, which can address these issues, which must be pursued and implemented. Education is the most important and central element of all short, medium and long term solutions.

1. Education

It is essential to establish educational strategies and cross-cultural awareness training for police to increase their understanding of the cultural diversity of our community. This must be implemented throughout all policing ranks.

Recently a young policeman told me that he had worked for 5 years in an area with a significant Arabic community, and was never informed about the diversity and concerns of this community. This resulted in a lack of communication between victims of crime and the police, which manifested in an unwillingness to report crime. Education and communication will bridge such a gap.

As in the rest of Australian society, racial intolerance can exist within the police force itself since the police force reflects mainstream Australia. As well as increasing education to counter this, the police force must have a clear commitment to counter any form of racial intolerance.

Although there are many measures available to police to deal with racial intolerance, legislation is often the first solution offered. However racial vilification legislation alone only deals with the symptoms of the problem. Education has the ability to address the root causes of the problem and provides long-term solutions.

Anti-racism laws can also be ineffective. Race-based crimes are by their very nature, difficult to prove, and given issues of access, and low reports rates amongst marginalised groups, have little likelihood of doing anything but punishing the most extreme of incidents. Although police may be willing to assist victims, they are often unable to respond due to a lack of training and resources. The recent addition of criminal sanctions to racial vilification laws in Victoria assigns to the police a greater role in preventing and acting on racially based incidents.

2. Recruiting

Another key to improving policing partnerships with the community is for police to reflect the cultural diversity of our community. This can be achieved by a concerted effort to recruit a diversity of Australians. It must be emphasised that a more diverse police force does not mean that those with an ethnic background are there to police their own communities, but rather to truly reflect the makeup of Australian society.

3. Multicultural aides

Another essential element of positive partnerships with the community are multicultural liaison officers. An initiative currently being tested in Victoria is an excellent example of how best to utilise such officers. Following the recent dramatic increase in racial vilification, police multicultural liaison officers are setting up “information caravans” in areas of Melbourne with high Arabic-speaking populations. They will be there to address increased concerns about security to take reports of incidents of vilification, and to advise people directly on action they may take against racism. Not only is this a positive initiative on its own, but the police also took it upon themselves beforehand to organise a briefing with concerned community leaders.

4. Partnerships

Police are thus increasingly focussing on building effective and positive relationships with the community. This is essential at this current time, when we have seen incidents of racial vilification rapidly increase, with children and women the main targets of verbal and physical abuse.

Effective consultations are imperative if police are to address the concerns as *experienced* by the community, rather than as *perceived* by police. Working groups such as the Police and Community Multicultural Advisory Committee – PACMAC - in Victoria must be established in all states to develop clear strategies and an action plan for the future.

Finally, without implementation, communication and consultations are rendered useless. In Victoria we have several police bodies addressing “Multicultural” issues, but many police remain unaware of the cultural diversity and serious concerns of our community. Recommendations must be implemented nationally and clear proactive campaigns must be developed to counter racism before it begins.

Partnerships are essential. And it is important that they are *partnerships*, not tokenistic “information sharing” sessions where only lip service is paid to solutions.

Conclusion

The events of the past 6 weeks have highlighted, more than ever, the need for policing partnerships with all Australians, to be strong and proactive. They play an integral role in ensuring that both proactive and reactive measures reduce vilification and crime. We must empower communities, facilitate their access to the criminal justice system, and ensure that minority groups are no longer marginalized through assumptions of inherent criminality because of their ethnic origin.

The only way we can fight crime effectively is to refrain from using terms such as “ethnic” and “tolerance”, and succumbing to an “us and them” mentality. Instead we must work towards an appreciation of cultural diversity and embrace multiculturalism not as a symbolic gesture but as a reality.