

## Book Review

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*A Study of Aboriginal Juveniles and Police Violence: A Report Commissioned by the National Inquiry Into Racist Violence* by C. Cunneen, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 1991.

The legal system tells us many stories of how we live and who we are. One of the failings of the criminal justice structure is that it has traditionally told only one story, or part of the story. For generations, the language of law and of criminal justice has ignored, silenced or mistranslated the experiences and lives of those we might call "disadvantaged". Only recently have women, for example, been able to try to impose a new narrative structure on our collective understanding of issues of crime and violence. This study of aboriginal juveniles and police violence seeks to tell the stories of a group which suffers under a dual handicap. The members of this narrative community are young and they are black. They are typically ignored, undervalued and silenced. Their stories have been of little interest. Now, their lives are obtaining some kind of recognition as we begin to hear their voices.

And we *must* listen because the stories *they* tell *us* about their lives tell us much about *our* lives, about what we never experience — about violence and brutality not as shocking, startling attacks on our otherwise placid existence, but of violence and pain as the dominant referents of their dealings with our criminal justice system.

A 15-year-old girl from the Sunshine Coast of Queensland tells how —

When I was in the watch house, the lady cop picked me up by the hair and said eat your food. I didn't want it . . . I wouldn't eat it.  
She picked me up by the hair and kept ramming my head into the wall, into the brick wall of the cells.

A 16-year-old boy from outer-metropolitan Sydney reports that he was punched several times while being questioned about a stolen vehicle. A 17-year-old from Perth says that he was punched, kneed and thrown to the ground by detectives while being questioned about a stolen vehicle. The young people report being hit by batons, telephone books, torches, baseball bats, chairs, handcuffs, axe handles, brooms, golf clubs and typewriters. 81 per cent claim that police used racist language. 21 per cent of juveniles in Western Australia reported that police made threats or suggestions relating to hanging or suicide.

These are not pretty stories. They do not offer us a pleasant view of a humanitarian juvenile justice system. But life is not full of pretty pictures and storybook endings. It is, for young Aboriginal people, full of violence and hatred and a criminal justice system which from top to bottom views them as objects, to be beaten, abused, threatened and discarded.

This report does not tell us nice stories. But it does tell us true stories. Read them and weep. Only the truth shall set us free.

David Fraser