

**Submission
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ASSAULTS ON MEMBERS OF THE NSW POLICE FORCE

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SUBMISSION NEW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW & SAFETY
Inquiry into and report on assaults on member of the NSW Police Force

The Department of Security Studies and Criminology at Macquarie University, Sydney, conducts applied research and teaching programmes in five disciplinary areas: strategic and defence studies; criminology; cyber security; intelligence studies; and counter-terrorism. This submission provides input into New Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety through highlighting emerging trends, impacts and unanswered questions concerning assault on police as well as providing policy recommendations to assist the work of the committee. Specifically, we focus on three main issues:

1. Current and recent incidence of assaults against police officers in NSW

- Data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) shows no discernible increase or decrease under the offence category of *Assault Police* in the five-year period between April 2015 and March 2020.
- The latest figures, from April 2019 to March 2020, show 2,495 incidents categorised as *Assault Police*, a marginal 1.5% increase from the previous year. BOSCAR have classified the crime category as *stable* over both its two- and five-year trend horizon.
- The severity of the offence for police organisations mean that validity of these numbers is likely to be very high, with minimal to zero instances of non-reporting. Furthermore, the threshold of what is considered ‘assault’ is likely to be lower amongst police than other occupational groups or civilians.
- Data only reports the total number of incidents under the category of *Assault Police*, giving little-to-no insight into the contexts or circumstances in which the offence took place. Different response strategies would be required if, for example, instances of assault on police were localised in specific communities, by the hands of a targeted demographic or if it was a concern primarily limited to tackling the ‘night-time economy’.

Recommendations

- i. To avoid creating a perception amongst communities and police that assault on police is a growing and prevalent crime problem.

- ii. To learn more about contexts and circumstances under which assault on police takes place, with the aim of gaining more detailed understanding of the concern.
- iii. To build appropriate and evidence-based response strategies that incorporate findings from Recommendation #2.

2. Current NSW Police Force strategies to engage community and school groups

- There is limited Australian-based literature examining the relationship (positive or otherwise) between community and school community programmes and instances of assault on police.
- A Queensland-based study from James Cook University, titled *Responding to Violent Assaults against Police*, reported on implementations measures to reduce instance of police assault. The recommended:
 - a) Community Education Programmes for school students in Years 10 – 12 on the impacts of violence on organisations.
 - b) Improvement in police training, focusing on communication, negotiation and mediation as well as identifying the psychological and physiological responses to high pressure situations.
 - c) Cultural awareness training, with a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as individuals suffering from the impacts of mental health.
 - d) Ongoing police officer operational skills training and internal police support arrangements in dealing with the aftermath of police assaults.
(Daws et al., 2019: 7 – 10)
- These recommendations highlight the need to [a] better equip police through training and awareness programmes and [b] foster initiatives that promote community and school outreach programmes.
- In NSW, the School Liaison Police (SLP) are an important link and hold the capacity to build a strong rapport across the Community as well as to enhance the legitimacy of police in the eyes of the Community, promoting a spirit of ‘policing by consent’ that is based on *consensus*, *transparency* and *accountability*.

Recommendations

- i. To increase investment and support into the School Liaison Police with the aim to enhance community engagement and the legitimacy of police.
- ii. To evaluate the methods and processes used by police when responding to incidents involving (either as a victim or offender) First Nation Peoples and/or individuals suffering from the impact of mental health.
- iii. To engage in meaningful community partnerships with the aim of promoting the spirit of ‘policing by consent’.
- iv. To increase community representation within the police, with a specific concern for creating pathways for individuals who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

3. Other related matters

- A holistic view is needed when examining instances of assault on police, one which considers such occurrences resulting from:
 - A sense of alienation between the police and the community they serve.
 - A perception of police as aggressive, alpha-male and lacking in sympathy.
 - A possible lack in the art of verbal communication
 - Increased exposure to individuals suffering from mental health issues
- The last point is particularly important when, in the broader context of cuts to health and welfare services, police are increasingly expected to manage complex situations arising from mental health challenges.
- The manner in which police enter certain communities and how they are equipped may also contribute towards a sense of alienation and *being policed* as opposed to *protected*. In recent years police have become increasingly 'weaponised', carrying a growing array of instruments of control, including Tasers, OC spray, firearms and body-worn cameras. Whilst purposing to protect an officer or members of the wider community, there is the possibility that such equipment may be viewed by some members of the community, especially Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders, as confrontational and may lead to an incitement of violence against police.

Recommendations

- i. To promote training initiatives to help equip front line officers with knowledge and understanding of both the community they serve and the challenges it faces.
- ii. To invest in future strategies that enhance a sense of community safety and integration, reflecting on the impact of police instruments of control.

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