

**Submission
No 182**

COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Australian Language and Culture Classes at Gunnedah Anglican Church
Date Received: 31 May 2024

Partially
Confidential

Mrs Helen Etherington

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To: the Honourable Edmond ATALLA MP
Community Safety in Regional & Rural Communities Inquiry
c/o NSW Parliament House
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
21st May 2024

Re: Crime and its effect on Migrant Women living in the rural town of Gunnedah, NSW 2380

Dear Mr Atalla,

My name is Helen Etherington, and I live in Gunnedah, a town of 13,000 people, situated in the beautiful Northwest Region of NSW which is home to approx. 185,000 people. We do not have a 24-hour police presence in our town.

I am a volunteer teacher of 'Australian Language and Culture' at the Gunnedah Anglican Church. I started up this program 18 months ago, to encourage and assist women to gain confidence in communicating with Australians and understanding how our society works. We now have 3 volunteer teachers and approx. 15 adult students, three toddlers and five brand new babies.

The students come from a mix of backgrounds such as Indonesian, Korean, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, Chilean and Japanese. Some of these women have experienced no crime before in their first country, others had experienced a range of crimes. None of them were expecting to experience crime in Australia as they hold the belief that Australia is a 'safe' country, free from war and terrorism. In fact many of them call Australia the 'lucky island'.

Sadly, in the last few years in Gunnedah, the incidence of youth crime relating to car theft and break-ins at home has escalated. The police do everything they can to catch the related thieves and perpetrators of these crime, however the current court system lets our community down. The concept that these children, mostly teenagers, are free to re-commit crimes over and over again is unacceptable to us. We feel that the current laws/interpretation of the laws do not represent the values of our society and the balance of power is swung too much in favour of perpetrator's rights and not of the victims, who should have the right to feel safe in their own homes and not have their property stolen.

However, the purpose of my letter is not to debate legal decisions with you but to inform you of how my students have reacted to the crime escalation in our town.

At first, the students who participate in Facebook groups, found out that so many cars were being taken and burnt out etc so they were discussing within themselves, how to protect themselves my making sure their cars were locked at night and to make sure that all their doors and windows on their houses were locked.

They were often worrying and checking on each other and also being extra cautious. Then one of the students experienced a break-in to their home. It was around 3am in the morning, and the mother (my student) and father were asleep in their bedroom and then their three children, aged 15,13,10 were sleeping in their separate bedrooms. The father woke up as he heard a noise in the loungeroom and went to investigate. Running down the hall towards him was a man in a balaclava with a machete raised in the air, screaming at him 'where are your car keys? We want your car keys!'.

The father ran back to the bedroom and struggled to close their bedroom door on the intruder, his wife, my student, joined him in pushing on the door so that the intruder could not get into them. The knew that at

least 3 people were running around their house, searching through their bags and items trying to find their car keys. The wife then started screaming out for the police, and eventually the thieves ran away.

The mother and father then went outside to make sure that they had really left their premises and then two of their children roamed the house trying to find mum and dad- they ended up thinking that their parents had been kidnapped and looked for places to hide in case some one came back to steal them.

Eventually the family re-united and called 000. The police were quick to respond and came within 20mins. They took them through the procedure of finger printing and explaining what would happen next. The police did capture the three youths who committed the crime. They were sent before the court and given bail conditions such as – to be home between certain hours and not commit any more crimes. We understand they have been committing more crimes, and the punishment has had no effect on them.

The outcome of this incident on the family was huge though- they had never experienced crime like it before in the country of Indonesia. They could not understand why the police don't beat the teens as a preventative, and why the news and local newspaper did not report on the crime. Their anxiety levels have been extreme. They were in shock for days and we brought around Indonesian food for them to eat and tried to bring them comfort. The mother was so distressed that the same thing might happen to her neighbours that we wrote a brochure about their story and a few people offered to letter box drop it into their neighbours, about 100 houses in total. I also helped them through accessing counselling through the Victims of Crime Support and came to an understanding that this service could be provided in many languages or with an interpreter if desired.

The level of anxiety/stress and depression on my student has been very real and ongoing. She had been a regular attender of our classes but is now frequently away with headaches or 'unwell'. Her joy has been squashed and she is fearful in her new country. Her son who is in Primary school stayed away from school to try and cope. Her best friend here in Australia is also a student and has been coping with panic attacks, racing heart and breathing issues, not related to physical illness but mental distress.

Nearly all our students became hyper vigilant at locking each door and window of their homes, often waking up at midnight to re-check all their locks again. Some are still worrying and having trouble sleeping- months after the incident. A lot of these women were pregnant or had tiny babies at the time, so sleeping well was very important to them, yet they have been robbed of the ability to sleep in peace. One student decided to sleep with a base ball bat and a knife under her pillow to just feel safer.

I arranged for a female police officer to come and talk to the group and explain the process a bit to us, especially how much force you can use in Australia if you are confronted by someone in your home or trying to steal your car. I was concerned that the lack of knowledge the students and their families had might result in vigilante or self- protection measures that are not allowed in Australia.

I look forward to hearing the outcome of your report, and hope that my information has been useful to you.
Regards

Helen Etherington BN, Dip Fam Hist.

Gunnedah Australian Language and Cultural Class

c/o Gunnedah Anglican Church

32 Elgin Street

GUNNEDAH NSW 2380

Please find attached 2 individual stories and one Coordinators stories about how crime is personally affecting us as members of the multicultural community in Gunnedah.

Attachments redacted