

ANZSOG Case Program

Mutual respect: Tackling youth crime in Blacktown (A)

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George Giannikos, Operations Manager of Westpoint Blacktown, ran down the fire stairs from his office on level 4 of the shopping centre and straight across the road to Blacktown police station.

When there's an emergency, I know how to get around Westpoint in minutes without running through the public areas, letting customers and retailers see me in a panic. The police had grabbed about six of these poor Sudanese kids, bundled them into the paddy wagon and taken them over to the station. I thought 'this is not on'. Doesn't matter where you are in any part of the world, you can't do this. We should be saying 'hey guys, disperse, stop dancing in the carpark'. That's all they were doing, just dancing in the carpark. So I ran over there and said 'I don't want these kids arrested', and that's the first time I met Mark Wright.

It was May 2008, and Superintendent Mark Wright was the new Commander of Blacktown police in western Sydney. He'd been tasked with the complex job of reducing the hotspot of youth crime that was Blacktown's Central Business District, but he didn't see a harsh law and order crackdown as the answer. So he was pleased to see a senior manager from Westpoint, one of the highest crime areas, over at the police station arguing for leniency. Giannikos recalled:

Mark saw that as an opportunity, so he said 'oh look that's good, we won't press charges'. He was 100% of the same mind, he knew it wasn't their fault.

Wright's history and training had given him some ideas about how to approach the problem, and it was becoming clear that he had some allies in the local area who could help him shift the dial on youth crime and help people feel safer in this important community hub.

This case was written by Sophie Yates for Professor Paul 't Hart, Utrecht University. It has been prepared from field research and from published materials as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Mark Wright, George Giannikos, Cate Sydes, Joanne Tau and Alan Pendleton is appreciated, but responsibility for the final content rests with ANZSOG.

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A cultural melting pot

In 2008, the City of Blacktown was the largest local government area in New South Wales, with a population of about 300,000. Located in the heart of Greater Western Sydney, its train and bus stations make Blacktown a major transport hub, and its compact central business district boasts a large shopping centre, supermarkets, restaurants, and a movie theatre (see *Exhibit 1*).

At the time, Blacktown was a culturally diverse area – and getting more diverse every year. There were nearly 200 different cultural groups, and just as many languages and dialects spoken. Larger ethnic groups included Pacific Islanders; Filipinos; and Sudanese and other sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom had escaped trauma in their home countries. Nearly 40% of the population had been born overseas, and about the same percentage were under the age of 25.¹ The youth unemployment rate was double the national average.

Krumping, shoplifting and ‘fight night’

Like other outer suburbs, there wasn’t a whole lot to keep children and young people busy in Blacktown. Groups of young people tended to congregate in the CBD, particularly at the shopping centre and train station, to hang out. Alan Pendleton was Mayor of Blacktown City Council from 2010-2012, and a long-term Councillor:

We’ve got a high unemployment rate, and the last thing you want is kids just hanging around the streets with nothing to do – they end up finding something to do, which usually isn’t law-abiding.

“I still don’t believe there was a racial undertone” argued Wright, but it was clear that some of the young people from different ethnic groups didn’t get along well – particularly the Pacific Islanders and black Africans.² “I think it was just kids, testosterone. They were having a go at people from a different group.”

For some reason, Thursday nights were particularly volatile. Locals had started calling it ‘fight night’. Wright recalled:

When I walked through there, particularly on a Thursday night, there was kids running everywhere, there were brawls, and you’d hear on the police radio what we call a double beeper, which is the high-pitched signal for an urgent call, youths fighting in the shopping centre... What it was, was just three or four kids having a fight, but then it became a joke, so that everyone would rush- it was like a school yard, and they’d yell out ‘FIGHT’, and all the kids would just run to see.

Things were worst on level 4 of Westpoint Shopping Centre, where “security was finding weapons concealed in pot plants and fire hydrant cases ... [young people] were hiding knives or machetes so that when there was a fight, they could easily grab the weapon”. Tenancy in the centre was only about 70%, and Westpoint was losing revenue because restaurateurs often refused to pay their rent after disturbances. “They were smart”, Giannikos explained: “they’d say ‘there was a fight last night, I’m not paying Thursday night’s rent’.”

Pendleton had seen the unrest grow over many years, and recalled the ‘lawless’ behaviour of the young people:

After [the fights] the youth used to run riot through the centre, they’d jump the counters down at Boost Juice, and take what they wanted and jump out.

¹ ABS (2010) National Regional Profile: Blacktown (C) (Local Government Area). Available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/LGA10750Economy12004-2008?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=LGA10750&issue=2004-2008>

² Wright explained that not all of the African young people were Sudanese, and that they were comfortable being referred to as ‘black Africans’. The same was true for Samoans, Tongans and other people from the Pacific Islands, who were comfortable with ‘Islanders’.

But some of the young people's behaviour was more innocent than it looked. The newest dance craze at the time was a form of street dance called 'krumping', which involves free, expressive, exaggerated, and highly energetic movement. It usually includes physical contact between dancers, and in fact began as a way to channel anger and aggression in non-violent ways. Youth worker Joanne 'Jojo' Tau explained how this often gave the wrong impression:

A lot of the African boys were into that, and for people that didn't know what it was, it looked like the kids were trying to fight each other. And because they had nowhere to go, they were dancing in the carpark of Westpoint. And so security were coming, and they were calling the police to move them on.

All of this added up to the 'Chernobyl' of western Sydney – when police produced heat maps of crime in the Blacktown City area, the CBD showed up as bright red. Wright remembered the weary jokes of his team: "A lot of staff would talk about it in meetings, you know, 'Chernobyl's had another outbreak'".

But that didn't mean the local police were itching for change – in fact, many of them had low expectations of Blacktown, and accepted this situation as normal. For Wright, his Operations Duty Officer epitomised this attitude when he remarked while on patrol one Thursday night: "I don't know what you're worried about, boss. This is Blacktown".

Checking the fences

When Mark Wright took command of Blacktown police, they were sinking a lot of resources into the CBD area without seeing much improvement. This didn't make much sense to him, because while the young people's behaviour was very disruptive and on occasion dangerous, it didn't qualify as serious crime – and crime in other areas of the command was being neglected.

Wright knew he had to 'check the fences' to gauge just how bad the problem really was:

So you've got to get out and you take your crime prevention officer, you take the police that have been working there, and you drive with them, and you go and have a look at the suburbs, you go into the shopping centres. You go with your licencing people into the hotels, so you really see and feel.

When it came to checking the fences in the CBD area, Wright knew he could tap into a powerful resource: community leaders from the two most prominent ethnic groups, the Sudanese and the Islanders. While initially suspicious of Wright and each other, the leaders were eventually won over after he invited them to special meetings and showed them CCTV of African and Islander youths in the shopping centre:

...clearly they were going to hurt each other. And then when the security from Westpoint came out, then you could see them baiting the security. Then the police arrive, and they're in the faces of the police. So what I did was get my key contacts to assemble about 25-30 of the Sudanese community and I brought them into the police station into a muster room, and put it up on the screen. And you could see the whole mood shift. And then they started talking amongst themselves, 'we need to do something. We can't allow this to happen'.

The next night, he did the same thing with a group of Pacific Islander community leaders. It had a profound effect. Together, the three groups instigated 'community walks' to observe firsthand the behaviour of the local youth, build relationships with each other, and learn about local laws and social expectations. Every Thursday night for a year, Wright, three of his officers, four Sudanese, and four Islanders walked the streets of Blacktown CBD. Transit police and Westpoint security guards were also involved. Westpoint also provided coffee vouchers so that everyone could sit down and get to know each other. For Wright, this strategy was effective because it showed them what was happening:

So it wasn't me telling them there was a problem, they were on the ground seeing it. So then they took the messages back, which was the best thing that could have happened. Because they're terrified of

their mothers. There was one particular lady who used to come with us, and she just cleaned out level 4 single-handedly.

With community leaders now on side, Wright started to instil a principle that would become the basis of all the work he and others did with Blacktown's youth – mutual respect:

We had 190 different cultural groups, and they would come and give me books on their culture. I'd say 'if I or my officers do something that offends you, please tell me, to help us understand. Similarly, if you do something that offends us or is improper or against the law, we will explain it to you'. So everything was embedded around mutual respect.

Securing hearts and minds

In order to pursue a longer term strategy to reduce youth crime, Wright knew he needed some early runs on the board. In order for any non-justice focused program to work, the initial violence needed to de-escalate: "We needed to show them that it wasn't acceptable. It was absolutely a show of force". Youth workers needed to feel safe on the streets. Wright also needed information about why the area was such a hotspot for young troublemakers. By sending police in to arrest the worst of the young offenders (not all of whom were juveniles), Wright was able to debrief them and find out why they were fighting. The results were surprising:

So what we found out is they weren't from Blacktown. They were from all over Sydney. So they'd have a disagreement over a girl or whatever, in the playground, and then it'd be 'right, 7 o'clock Thursday night, Westpoint'. And that's where the term fight night came from, because then everyone said 'we'll go to Blacktown to watch the fights'.

The position of Blacktown as a transport hub for western Sydney, with a shopping centre so nearby, had made it ideal for bored youth people to congregate from many different areas. But Wright's briefing to his tactical team was to stand off if possible: "be there but don't intervene unless it's absolutely necessary". Arresting young people was not the ultimate goal.

However, a strong police presence with few tangible results in the form of arrests, searches, and drug seizures meant that Wright's superiors watched the situation nervously. He knew he didn't have much longer to pour so many resources into the Blacktown CBD without showing some clear progress. He'd secured the area, but now what?

Exhibit 1: Blacktown Central Business District

