

Notoriously Violent

Examining why broader communities may think Western Sydney is violent

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It is no secret that the state of New South Wales has suburbs well known for their elegance and prestige and others for quite the opposite. We will often see a news report about a police raid, shooting or stabbing in Bankstown, as opposed to the story of a heroic lifeguard from Bondi. Many youths from Western Sydney are perceived as felons. What is it that distinguishes suburbs and communities? The focal point of this article is to confront why broader communities think Western Sydney is violent. On the surface, the answer is simple, especially with societal belief that more crime means more violence. However, there are other underlying issues that may cause broader communities to think this way. This article will discuss how external factors, such as environments, impact internal factors, such as individuals, when analysing violence. It will also seek to find correlations between the two.

In order to minimise confusion when relating the terms ‘violence/violent acts’ and ‘crime’, it may help to understand that not all crimes are crimes that involve violence or violent acts (McCaghy, Capron, Jamieson & Carey, 2008). According to McCaghy, et al. (2008), crime is not limited to violence and can include acts of perjury, fraud, corruption, etc. In contrast, violence can be defined as any force that inflicts harm on others physically or even mentally (Bishop & Phillips, 2006). However, for the purposes of this article, the terms ‘violence’ and ‘crime’ are used interchangeably because of the perception within the wider community that all acts of violence in Western Sydney are ‘crimes’.

Violence is an act or behaviour that reasserts itself outwardly, effectively observed in the social environment (Cohen, 1980). Within the local communities of NSW (and to a larger extent, society as a whole), there are social elements that create and even sustain violence (Cohen, 1980). According to Siegal (1998), there are criminological reports in the US that demonstrate individuals from any class (whether rich or poor) have the same capability of engaging in a criminal act. Evidently, crime can be committed by any individual regardless of socio-economic status. So what is it that makes suburbs like Western Sydney *seem* more violent?

Western Sydney would not appear so violent if we were to compare it to the notorious ghettos of America. The meaning of violence is subjective to the context it is placed in (Munck, 2008). Statistically, Western Sydney is more violent than other regions in NSW and therefore seems violent in general (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research: <http://boecd.lawlink.nsw.gov.au>). Broader communities think Western Sydney is violent because it is compared and contrasted to more fortunate regions, as Feldman (2005) implies. Comparing and contrasting members of a community to the entire state creates the notion of an In-Group/Out-Group situation (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). The members of a particular group are known as ‘in-group’ and non-members are known as ‘out-group’. The Ultimate Attribution Error identifies the negative aspects of the Out-Group as an advantage for the In-Group. This also adds to the positive aspects of the In-Group (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). For example, a losing football team would reinforce the success of the winning team regardless of how well the winning team actually played. An In-Group attributes the failures of an Out-Group to their superiority – ‘you didn’t only lose because you played so badly, you also lost because we played so well’. The broader community is an ‘in-group’ which identifies itself as superior to Western Sydney, the ‘out-group’.

The Social Process Theory explains that criminal behaviour is a function of individual socialisation (Siegal, 1998). It compares the complexities of criminal human behaviour via three major categories; Social Learning Theory, Control Theory and Labelling Theory. As Siegal (1998) states, Social Learning Theory argues that criminal behaviour is learnt through human interaction. An example would be knowing how to

steal a car after being shown by a friend. In contrast, Control Theory is human behaviour dictated through close interactions with institutions and individuals. An example would be when an individual refrains from participating in negative behaviour because they fear it will damage the dignity of their culture. Finally, the Labelling Theory identifies that when certain people become 'labelled' as criminals by authoritative figures they begin living up to this label. They fulfill the perception given to them. Combining Siegal's theories with external factors such as the media and internal factors such as self-identity, the individual's upbringing can result as either law abiding or criminal.

For the broader community to form the impression of a violent Western Sydney there must be an outlet or source by which they have heard or seen. The most abundant resource of information for the public is the media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). Newspapers, television, radio, music and the Internet all influence and impact what an individual sees or hears and then comes to know (Howitt, 1998). This process of information intake then adopts the form of being spread independently (Cohen, 1980). After watching a drama series on the history of gangs in Australia and spreading the information through word of mouth, individuals begin to suspect that some cultural groups may be part of a gang. Whether the news is true or false, individuals who spread the information may add, discount or dramatise the issue, distorting what was originally said and affecting its validity. The reliability of where the information is sourced is as important as the information itself. The broader community thinks Western Sydney is violent because the mass media identify it this way.

According to the NSW Government of Human Services, Western Sydney is one of the most culturally diverse regions in New South Wales, and Australia (<http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au>). The role different cultures have in communities can influence the perception of this area (Presdee, 2000). Combining cultures may lead to positive or negative outcomes. For example, in the media we see and hear about different 'ethnic youth gangs' from West and Southwestern Sydney. As the Social Process Theory contends, when the media consistently demonises certain types of people from a particular area, it promotes similar kinds of behaviour by other members of the community. Furthermore, individuals not part of that particular community judge and form an opinion. For instance, the Macquarie Fields riots in 2005 were sparked by a fatal accident that occurred after police pursued a stolen car. Infuriated members of the community protested aggressively against unsatisfactory police methods. The rest of the state however, witnessed a suburb riddled with violence and other serious issues.

Broader communities also think Western Sydney is violent because of personal experiences. A person visiting Parramatta might in fact become the victim of a crime; mugging, assault, etc. This strengthens the stigma surrounding a community and is amplified when the victim tells family and friends about his/her ordeal. This often results in community stereotyping. The Fundamental Attribution Error demonstrates that a person (or people) forms a bias decision against another person's behaviour due to an internal cause rather than a situational cause (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). An ethnic-Australian man with a psychotic disorder is more likely to be accused of criminal behaviour because of his cultural background than his mental health and stability. However, a flaw in the Fundamental Attribution Error can be observed with subcultures. A group of football supporters range from all different ethnicities, ages and genders. It is support for the team that forms their relationship (and consequential behaviour) rather than the personal attributes of each supporter (Thornton, 1995). How individuals develop an impression of themselves is dependent on their upbringing, their set morals, beliefs and values (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). From a young age through to youthhood (including adolescence), individuals are influenced by anything and everything that surrounds them (Berk, 2006). Incorporating but not limited to, familial, social and educational relationships and experiences, the judicial systems and authoritative figures all have means to affect the individual's thought processes and behaviour (Berk, 2007).

Individuals from Western Sydney allow a negative perception of their community. It is possible they even promote it as violent with their actions and behaviour. A young child is raised with the teaching that it is wrong to steal. The child acknowledges this as he/she becomes older and never steals. This child has set an example for the family and other members of the community, forming an environment of less theft. It is not the environment that makes the individual violent, it is the individual that makes the environment violent (Berk, 2006).

Of all the arguments proposed in this article, the Social Process Theory is perhaps the strongest theoretical explanation as to why Western Sydney is perceived as violent. Social and educational institutions, the media and those in authority all form the environment that influences an individual. Such influence is reflected into the broader community which forms an impression. The Control Theory contends that the individual should be in control of the image they portray. Western Sydney is perceived as violent because there are individuals within who cannot retract from committing violence. The Labeling Theory explains it is because of those in authority labeling certain groups that causes deviances. Individuals live up to their 'label' of violence. Of course, the Social Process Theory will not make sense unless comparisons are made. Western Sydney is perceived as violent because it has been compared and contrasted to less violent regions in NSW – for example, comparing the amount of those labeled 'criminal' in Bankstown to Vaucluse. But questioning the origin of these comparisons (who makes them? how do they become publically recognised?), places pressure on the reliability or even validity of the information being presented. A police report on assault rates is more reliable than hearsay in social interactions. Violence is subjective to the context. The information people take in and form an impression with maybe exaggerated, false or overemphasised, restricting the public from overcoming the negative image of Western Sydney. Whether through predisposed thoughts or personal experience, a cyclic impact is apparent. Individuals and the image they create, the surroundings of an environment, including the influence of media, all play a part in our understanding of why broader communities think Western Sydney is violent.

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