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January 15, 2009

Racialized Policing

From the very first day of the inquest into the shooting death of Matthew Dumas by a Winnipeg police officer, lawyer Robert Tapper took pains to emphasize that race had nothing to do with Matthew's death. In her recently released report, Provincial Court Judge Mary Curtis agreed, concluding that Matthew died as a result of his own actions, not because of police racism.

Many might take solace in Judge Curtis' conclusion, seeing it as affirming that the problem of Aboriginal-police relations in our city is really a problem 'of' Aboriginal people. But too many Aboriginal people in Winnipeg know otherwise.

For the past five months I have been engaged in a research project that has involved interviewing Aboriginal people about their experiences with the police. The initial plan was to conduct 30 interviews but more and more people kept coming forward, wanting to tell their experiences. We eventually stopped at 79 interviews.

What I have learned from these interviews is disturbing. Racist stereotypes and racialized practices were starkly evident in people's accounts. Aboriginal men who live in the inner city are regularly questioned by police. When asked "what did I do wrong?" police typically respond, "you fit the description." As one young man remarked, "Look at me. I look pretty much like every other male who lives in the North End." Sometimes the men are taken to the police station several miles

away, and then left to find their own way home upon release. Aboriginal women reported that they cannot even walk to the grocery store without being stopped by police, who assume they are prostitutes.

In this respect, the inner city is a "racialized space." Just being present—and Aboriginal—within that space makes you suspect.

Other spaces in Winnipeg are racialized, but in a different way. One young man told of being stopped by police in the Tuxedo area and asked what he was doing there. He replied that he was on his way to visit a friend. The police responded, "how can you have a friend who lives here?"

Other reports of racialized practices are even more troubling. Accounts of the so-called "phone book treatment" came up regularly in the interviews. Apparently, when hit with a phone book, no visible bruises are left on the surface of the skin. The police seem to use this strategy—sometimes in the elevator of the Public Safety Building—to extract information from people.

Another disturbing practice involves the police driving Aboriginal people to the outskirts of Winnipeg and leaving them there—often in bitterly cold weather—to find their way back home. We know from Justice Wright's inquiry in Saskatchewan into the death of Neil Stonechild that such practices occurred in that province. Manitoba appears to be no exception.



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FAST FACTS continued ...

One man, now in his forties, recalled that between the ages of 10 and 13 he was picked up on at least ten occasions—by the same police officer—and driven to the outskirts. The routine became so familiar that the officer would say to him, “you know the drill.” He was to take off his shoes, which the officer would put into the trunk of the cruiser car, and then would be left to walk back to the city. After the first time this happened, he told his father what the police had done. His dad didn’t believe him. But on one occasion, when bending over to remove his shoe, he picked up a handful of pebbles and threw them in the officer’s face, giving him the chance to run away. When he returned home with the one shoe, his dad finally believed his account.

Drugs, gangs, and violence are pressing problems in the inner city. But the strategies that police use to deal with these problems are themselves problematic. Several people told of being picked up by police and coerced to tell them names of people involved in the drug trade. Several were offered money if they gave over names. As one respondent said, while he may be aware of drug activity in his neighbourhood, for him to “rat” in this way puts him in danger.

Part of the problem has to do with the racialized frames that police use to interpret situations. One man told of an incident when he was visiting with his stepsons. The family had been at home, having a celebration. At around 3 AM they headed to the nearby gas station to buy cigarettes. One of the stepsons was stabbed by another man. They managed to get the wounded young man back home and called for an ambulance. When police arrived, they wouldn’t listen when the father tried to explain what had happened. The police simply assumed that this was the proverbial “Aboriginal drinking party” that had turned violent.

Too many people spoke of the lack of respect shown by police. Words like “squaw” and “f’ing

Indian” seem to be used regularly by police officers. And there is a definite silencing that goes on around police misbehaviour. People don’t speak out for fear of the consequences and because they fear that they won’t be believed, or nothing will be done.

These fears are well founded. Statistics collected by the Inner City Safety Coalition show that 38% of the cases investigated by the Law Enforcement Review Agency between 1996 and 2005 took over a year to be completed. Almost all complaints (89%) were either dismissed by LERA or abandoned and withdrawn by the complainant. Very few complaints result in action being taken to hold police accountable for their behaviour. Between 1995 and 2006 only 5% of cases were resolved informally and only 5% went to a public hearing before a provincial court judge.

These experiences of Aboriginal people provide us with a broader context for situating the death of Matthew Dumas—a context that is certainly coloured by race. Like too many young Aboriginal men, Matthew had been subject to a police stop because he supposedly “fit the description.” Knowing the fear, distrust—and resulting hostility—of police that prevail among Aboriginal people helps to understand why it might be that Matthew made the decision to run away from an officer. Sadly, the result was lethal.

The Dumas inquest took place over two weeks last June. In the months that followed, two more Aboriginal men—Michael Langan and Craig McDougall—died at the hands of Winnipeg police officers. How many more Aboriginal men will we lose before all of us can begin to acknowledge that racism is alive in Winnipeg?

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