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Australian police and policing

ACT police accused of 'racial profiling' for allegedly pulling guns on Indigenous teenager after mistaking him for suspect

Family of 17-year-old travelling on bus that was stopped by police say officers searched boy even after admitting mistake

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Police in **Canberra** allegedly pulled their guns on a 17-year-old Indigenous boy who they mistook for a suspect in an aggravated burglary, prompting accusations of “institutional racism” and “racial profiling”.

The boy’s family allege he was travelling on a bus on when it was stopped by police officers looking for a suspect accused of robbing a shop with a knife.

The family alleged officers then entered the bus with guns drawn, dragged the boy off and “slammed him on to the ground whilst multiple officers had their knees on his back, causing him difficulty breathing”.

They said this occurred before the officers asked the boy for identification and his name. The family has not named the boy to protect his privacy.

When the officers then compared a photo of the suspect with the boy they had arrested, they released him and apologised.

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“Even after admitting they had the wrong boy, the officers still searched him,” said family members outside the ACT Legislative Assembly on Thursday.

“That is not policing, that is abuse and a clear example of policy brutality and racial profiling at its finest,” they said.

At a press conference on Thursday, the ACT’s chief police officer, Scott Lee, again apologised for the boy’s treatment. Lee acknowledged the trauma the event would have caused him, his family and the broader Indigenous community.

But Lee also defended the officers involved and said that after reviewing body-worn camera footage, he supported their actions.

“[They were] responding to reports of an active armed offender in possession of a knife in Westfield in Woden who had allegedly committed robbery at a store inside the shopping centre,” Lee said.

“At the same time, police had commenced receiving reports that there had been multiple attempted carjackings in the area with a young person allegedly threatening members of the public with a knife.”

Lee said police had received reports that a person “matching the physical and clothing description of the alleged offender was on a bus”.

“Given police were responding to multiple eyewitness reports of an active armed offender in a heavily populated area of Canberra, officers acted with the immediate aim of preventing a worst case scenario occurring,” Lee said.

The incident will now be investigated by the Australian federal police's professional standards unit.

The police force has been condemned by Indigenous community groups in the ACT, who issued a joint statement disagreeing with Lee's explanation.

"No Aboriginal child in Canberra should ever face a gun because of police racial profiling," [said the statement reported by the ABC](#).

Kaylene McLeod, a member of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elected body, said "there is no world in which this response is justified".

"A gun pointed at the Aboriginal boy on a bus is not a mistake - it is a catastrophic failure of judgment, process, and humanity," McLeod said.

Thomas Emerson, an independent MLA in the ACT parliament, said police "had a difficult job to do, but apprehending an innocent Aboriginal child at gunpoint is not part of that job".

"This is exactly what institutional racism looks like, and we have to be willing to call it out," Emerson said.

"Making a mistake is one thing, but there's no excuse for targeting an Aboriginal child because of how he looks."

In response, Lee said he did not believe the police force had "institutional racism".

"We have been on the record that we are committed to improving the arrangements, training, processes and systems," Lee said.

The ACT's police minister, Marisa Paterson, expressed her "sincere apologies to the young person and his family on behalf of the government".

Paterson said police had her full support.

"I hear the concerns raised by the family, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elected body and other stakeholders about racial profiling," Paterson said.

"Continuing to work to build trust and relationships with parts of our community that feel vulnerable in their interactions with police is a priority for myself."

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