

# Western Australia: Indigenous boys drown trying to escape police

By Richard Phillips  
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Over 500 people came together on the banks of the Swan River in Perth, the Western Australian state capital, last Saturday afternoon to mourn the death of Chris Drage, 16, and Trisjack Simpson, 17, two Aboriginal boys who drowned on September 10, following a police pursuit. Family and relatives from across the state laid flowers, photographs and messages for the teenagers against a tree on the river bank.

Drage, Simpson and three other teenagers were being chased on foot after a burglary was reported in the Maylands Peninsula area on the river. According to media reports, a local resident contacted police, alleging that the group were “jumping the fences” of homes along the river.

Police, including members of the Tactical Response Group, were pursuing the teenagers in the area, which is surrounded by the river on three sides, when four of them jumped into the water in an attempt to escape.

Two of the five boys were taken into police custody but Drage and Trisjack disappeared underwater as they tried to cross the river. Their bodies were eventually recovered by police divers. The family of a fifth boy later told the police that he had survived the chase. None of the boys had been charged with any offences.

The mainstream media offered the usual crocodile tears to the traumatised families while Western Australian (WA) police commissioner Chris Dawson described the deaths “as nothing short of tragedy.”

Arthur Ninyette, Trisjack Simpson’s grandfather, told Nine News that he wanted answers from the WA police commissioner. The terrified teenagers, he said, were “unarmed, scared and not dangerous.”

The police did not know “whether the boys could swim or not, and yet they kept pushing them towards the water. I herded animals up like that when I used to go hunting kangaroos,” he added. “I want to know why those boys were chased to the river and the chase wasn’t called off.”

The police pursuit and subsequent drowning of Drage and Simpson, which are defined as “death in police presence”—the same as a death in custody—will be the subject of a state coroner’s inquest. But like every other official investigation into “deaths in custody,” including inquests into two separate drowning deaths from police pursuits since 2012, it will exonerate police.

One of the most infamous cases of an Aboriginal youth killed in a police pursuit was that of TJ Hickey in Sydney in February 2004. Hickey, 17, was riding his bicycle when a police car began chasing him. Hickey crashed his bicycle, was impaled on a spiked fence, and died the next day.

A coronial inquest ruled the incident a “freak accident” and declared that the police did not “contribute in any way to [TJ’s] death.” Fourteen years later no officer has ever been disciplined, let alone punished, over their pursuit of Hickey.

Commenting on the drowning of Drage and Simpson, WA Aboriginal Legal Service chief executive Dennis Eggington called on the state government to provide additional resources in order to speed up the inquest. The families “need some closure” he told the ABC. “They deserve the truth and nothing but the truth.”

The “truth” about last week’s tragedy, however, is not a forensic question but a political one. That the two desperate teenagers were so terrified of the police that they were prepared to risk their lives is no surprise. Their reaction was a product of their own personal experiences and those of generations of indigenous people who have been subjected to cruel and violent treatment by authorities.

The drownings occurred against a background of increasing state violence against Aboriginal youth, who confront a future of endemic unemployment and permanent poverty.

Both boys were talented Australian rules footballers

but, like thousands of children from disadvantaged working-class families, and indigenous families in particular, everything was stacked against them.

Chris's mother Winnie Hayward was born into poverty in Katanning, about 280km southwest of Perth. All of her older brothers and sisters were victims of the official "stolen generations" policy and been removed from their family by government authorities.

Winnie had two children and eventually moved to Perth as a single mother where Chris was born. Forced to live in unhealthy and substandard housing for years, she struggled against all odds to raise her children.

Chris attended primary school but had learning difficulties and was diagnosed with dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADHD, and given special tuition. He was eventually enrolled at Clontarf Aboriginal College, a former Christian Brothers College in Perth, but was bullied by other children, stopped attending classes and playing sport, and became involved with drugs.

Trisjack Simpson, who met Chris at Clontarf Aboriginal College, came from a rural background and also had learning difficulties. His family had firsthand experience of police harassment and racial violence. His grand-uncle Victor Simpson was killed in 1985 by Brian Williams, a hotel publican and an ex-police officer, in Mullewa about 470km north of Perth. One year after the murder a jury acquitted Williamson of all charges.

Drage and Simpson became close friends at Clontarf and stopped attending school. About a year ago, on October 19, the two boys were involved in a major motorbike accident while attempting to evade police. Chris suffered a fractured skull, internal bleeding and brain injuries and put into an induced coma for three weeks. As his mother told the media last week, the head injuries made him "agitated, scared and angry."

After being released from hospital, the two teenagers were sent to the high security Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre south of Perth. According to recent medical research published in *BMJ Open*, nine out of ten youths in the facility had some form of severe brain impairment.

The notorious detention centre was the subject of official complaints by Amnesty International over its incarceration of three boys in solitary confinement for at least two weeks between May and August last year.

The youth, who were accused of rioting, were confined to tiny "Intensive Support Unit" cells and only allowed out of their cells for just 10 minutes each day, during which time they were handcuffed. Amnesty International

also accused authorities of failing to provide proper medical treatment, excessive use of force and lack of family contact, education and exercise time.

A letter from one of the boys said he was "treated like a dog" and admitted to self-harming as a "coping mechanism." He added: "The reason I am writing this letter is because I really do feel like this is the last straw for me. I need help and I need it fast or I will end up doing something stupid."

The horrifying mistreatment at Banksia Hill followed the revelations, on national television, of torture and other extreme violence used against boys, some as young as 10, inside the Northern Territory's Don Dale juvenile detention centre. The abuses, which occurred over the previous six years, included lengthy periods of solitary confinement, hooding, strapping in "mechanical restraint chairs" and other illegal actions.

Aboriginal communities in Western Australia are among the poorest in the country, suffering the highest rates of arrest, jailing, homelessness and suicide, and the lowest life expectancy.

Of the 147 Aborigines, including children, who have died in custody over the last ten years, 43 died in Western Australia. Under its mandatory sentencing regime, Western Australia has 20 times more indigenous prisoners than non-indigenous inmates. Almost 50 percent of juveniles in Australian detention centres are Aborigines but in Western Australia the figure is over 75 percent, the highest percentage for indigenous populations in the world.

The social crisis indicated by these figures, and the deaths of Chris Drage and Trisjack Simpson and other heart-breaking tragedies, are a damning indictment of the profit system and all those who defend it. This is a social order has long outlived its right to exist and cannot be patched up by utopian calls for "reforms" to police and judicial procedures.

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