

Winnipeg Copwatch

a newsletter by

In solidarity with survivors of police violence

winnipegcopwatch.org

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Trans Day of Remembrance vigil: Copwatch attends in solidarity



Sharon Hayes holds a sign with a slogan from the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike in her slide installation work **In the Near Future, New York**, 2005. Image recontextualized with the artist's permission.

Shelagh Pizey-Allen

On November 20, 2009, people gathered in the parking lot of the Rainbow Resource Centre to remember, grieve, and celebrate the lives of transgender and transsexual people who fell victim to violence in the past year. The Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) was initiated to remember people who were killed because of anti-transgender hatred or prejudice. This year marked the fifth annual Transgender Day of Remembrance held in Winnipeg, and Winnipeg Copwatch was invited to be present at the vigil to observe and document any interactions with the police.

The organizers of this year's vigil decided against getting a police permit or asking the police to be present because of the violence and harassment that has been experienced by trans and gender-variant people at the hands of the police and criminal justice system.

Police abuse and mistreatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the United States, for example, are widespread and hugely unreported, indicates an Amnesty International report released in 2005. A soon-to-be-released US-wide study conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality reports similar findings, showing that 71% of transgender people have experienced misconduct or harassment by police, while 45% of transgender people are not comfortable reporting crimes to the police.

Violence directed at trans people, including violence at the hands of the police, is a systemic problem world-wide. Writing about the TDOR, activist and scholar Viviane Namaste points out that violence against transgender and transsexual people is not always a direct result of an individual officer's transphobia or hatred of trans people. She explains that, on a societal scale, trans or gender-nonconforming people are more likely to be denied access to health care, have difficulty finding employment, be kicked out of their homes, and experience violence in their lives. As a result, trans people are at greater risk of experiencing poverty,

homelessness, and criminalization for economic crimes such as sex work or shoplifting.

A Native American transgender woman from Los Angeles interviewed by Amnesty International states that "the police are not here to serve; they are here to get served . . . every night I'm taken into an alley and given the choice between having sex or going to jail."

Systemic violence and discrimination faced by trans people in the prison system include being housed in inappropriate facilities, meaning that trans people are placed in male or female prisons depending on their genitals, and not their gender identities or presentations. Not only is this disrespectful and humiliating, it is also extremely unsafe. Trans and gender-variant people, especially trans women in men's prisons, are more likely to experience rape and sexual assault at the hands of other inmates and prison guards. Trans people are sometimes placed in isolation to be protected from other inmates, but this effectively punishes them for being trans. Isolation can cause severe mental health issues, and prisoners in segregation are sometimes denied access to privileges, such as going outside. Incarcerated trans people also face being denied trans-related health care, such as access to hormones.

At the TDOR vigil in Winnipeg, speeches were made by community activists and trans people that called attention to the range of systemic violence experienced by trans and gender-variant people locally and internationally. One trans woman who had been denied access to basic medical services told her story of being turned away by numerous doctors in Winnipeg. An ally remembered the lives of her friends who had been tragically murdered. Another speaker reminded people that the Manitoba government does not provide funding for sex-reassignment surgeries.

Not all of the people represented and remembered on the TDOR identified themselves as being transsexual, transgender or gender variant; sometimes murder victims had been killed

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Report finds police target newcomers and people of colour

Garth Hardy

Racial profiling, intimidation, and disrespectful and discourteous actions and language are just some of the behaviours that the Winnipeg Police Service engage in on a regular basis when dealing with newcomer communities, explains a report issued by the Winnipeg Police Advisory Board. The report, *Newcomers' Perspectives on Policing Issues*, was compiled following a September 2009 discussion group with representatives from newcomer communities. The discussion was hosted by the Winnipeg Police Advisory Board with the assistance of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba and the Salvation Army's Multicultural Family Centre.

The report indicates that the overwhelming majority of police-newcomer interactions relayed to the board by community representatives were negative. Experiences detail several counts of police misconduct and bungling, including entering and searching houses without warrants, entrapment, stop and search without cause, beatings of youth and, on at least one occasion, entering a house with a warrant in hand at 2:00 a.m. and physically pinning a 12-year old occupant to the floor while refusing to allow a woman occupant to clothe herself. Only later did police acknowledge that the house was not the address listed on the warrant.

The findings of the report, as well as those of the 1999 *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba*, indicate that the justice system is failing communities of colour – in particular, Aboriginal and African newcomer communities. Both reports detail that racial profiling and racist discrimination are being carried out by Winnipeg police on a regular basis.

Daniel Asrat, who participated in the Winnipeg Police Advisory Board discussions as a representative of the Ethiopian community in Winnipeg, believes, "The people, including the community I represent, should be fully protected from the abuse of power on the part of the police . . . Arrests for trivial causes, without warrant, not only

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(continued from *Trans Day*)

because they were perceived to be trans or transgressing gender norms. The DC Trans Coalition, a volunteer organization based in Washington, reports that trans people are further susceptible to forms of police profiling, including profiling based on perceived age, race, and class.

The fact that many of the murders remembered at the Trans Day of Remembrance remain unsolved indicates that the living situations of trans people living in poverty or on the street can be dangerous and precarious and that the police are often unwilling to engage seriously with transphobic violence.

Winnipeg Copwatch is committed to ending police violence against all people. We extend our sympathy and solidarity with all those who have lost a loved one to transphobic violence, and stand with trans and gender-variant people and their allies in calling for a world without violence and an end to systemic discrimination.

Footnotes and further reading available at winnipegcopwatch.org

(continued from *Report finds*)

tend to create breaches of the peace, but render the law and its ministers the subject of public contempt. Democratic, civilian control of the police is crucial and central in the fight against racism and for racial equality, and in the fight to protect every citizen . . . Racism is deeply embedded in Winnipeg police. Systemic racism is part of the unwritten code of conduct that permeates the very fabric of Winnipeg police. It is, therefore, appropriate for members of our community to get to understand systemic racism and to use that knowledge to challenge its evils. One of the problems is that we don't know our rights. We need to know how the system works, so we will be in a better position to challenge it."

Sel Burrows, a member of the Police Advisory Board, has these personal sentiments about the findings, "I believe that we need more eyes on the street who watch for criminal behavior against our marginalized populations . . . (the) police should be held accountable by a civilian oversight board. The board should have members from the communities that are most likely to suffer from abuse of power."

Speaking to his personal experiences as a community organizer in Point Douglas, Burrows adds, "We have found that by holding the police accountable to the community to behave professionally they have improved their behavior immeasurably. Our approach is to hold police officers to the highest level of professional behaviour, and we seem to be having some success . . . The most effective control on abuse of power is public scrutiny. The technology of cameras on cell phones has shown to be a major benefit to dissuading persons, police and otherwise, from abusing their power."

Newcomers' Perspectives on Policing Issues is available for the public to read on the City of Winnipeg's website and at winnipegcopwatch.org. The *Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry* can be accessed at www.ajic.mb.ca/volume.html.

An attempt was made to contact the Winnipeg Police Service for this article, but they did not respond.

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News Briefs

More news briefs at winnipegcopwatch.org. For more information on these stories, please contact us.

Winnipeg Police Service

Police beating caught on video

On January 28 a video was presented in court showing WPS officers beating a man in a parking lot in downtown Winnipeg almost a year ago. CBC says the video shows four officers pinning him to the ground, while others kick, knee, and punch him, as well as taser him twice.

"I honestly did not recognize him. His face was swollen to twice its normal size. His eyes were black," said his lawyer, Dan Manning.

The police had been aware of the video for a year, but it was not brought to the public's attention until late January 2010, when Manning introduced it as evidence in the man's trial. Police earlier claimed the man had resisted arrest, but Judge Ray Wyant saw no evidence of this in the video. See for yourself: the video is linked from winnipegcopwatch.org



New police budget

City council OKed \$3.5 million to buy a helicopter for the WPS. They also approved the \$30 million purchase of the old Canada Post building on Graham Avenue, and \$105 million in upgrades to turn it into the new police headquarters. The new HQ won't be ready until 2013.

Patrol Report

Police leave man exposed in freezing temperatures

On December 12, 2009, after raiding a house with arms drawn, police officers escorted a young man outside. He was handcuffed and wearing only a long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves rolled up. On this evening, the windchill made the temperature feel like -38.

Instead of searching the man indoors, the police officers searched him outside for two minutes and then sat him in the back of a car. Ignoring two empty cruisers that sat idling and warm, the officers placed the arrested individual into one of the cold, parked vehicles.

Later, an officer came out of the house, started one of the parked cars and went back inside. Wearing winter uniforms with gloves and toques, the officers were sure to warm up their cars before they would drive them; there can be no doubt that

Inquiry into the death of Wilfred Asham

Family, friends, and supporters have raised the profile of Wilfred Asham's death in custody of the WPS in 2007 to the level that an inquest has been announced. The inquest will only examine the circumstances that led to his death and not result in charges or punitive action against anyone found responsible.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police

RCMP sweep complaint under the rug

The Commission for Public Complaints (CPC) against the RCMP issued a report saying that the RCMP were wrong to informally resolve a complaint about the RCMP tasing a 15-year-old girl who was handcuffed face-down on the floor of a holding cell. The CPC found that the RCMP were not justified in tasing the girl and pointed to a systemic problem of there often being no record of how complaints have been handled.

RCMP investigate RCMP shooting, then keep the results secret

The band council of Wagmatcook, Cape Breton, are upset that the investigation into the RCMP shooting of a man on the reserve included RCMP officers. RCMP are failing to divulge their report, citing privacy reasons. David Eby of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Union says police often keep documents secret to shield themselves from accountability, rather than for privacy reasons.

Cross-Canada

CSIS operating without accountability

The executive director for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association called on CSIS to be opened up to external review after it was shown to have failed to make available information it was required to provide as part of at least two national security cases. Currently, CSIS runs with almost no oversight apart from that of the federal cabinet.

Cop quits out of fear of fellow officers

An ex-Edmonton police officer has testified that he quit the force as a rookie out of fears for his safety after observing his fellow officers engage in serious criminal behaviour. He told the board that just minutes before he was to testify, his family's safety was threatened by police officers.

they were aware of the cold the arrested individual was exposed to in the back seat of the parked car. Approximately 15-20 minutes after the individual was placed in the back seat, an officer turned on the car. According to Environment Canada's website, when the windchill is -35 or lower, frostbite can occur in less than 10 to 15 minutes.

Not one officer challenged the tactic of placing someone in extremely cold weather conditions without proper clothing. Not one considered the safety of this individual. As a group, the officers participated in dehumanizing an individual through their ordinary, everyday practices.

Indeed, incidents of police brutality do not always take extreme forms, and they are not isolated. Police exert and abuse their physical and symbolic power over people's lives through ordinary, systemic and everyday practices – through what they do as well as what they fail to do. When these dehumanizing practices become commonplace, when people become accustomed to being stopped by police on the basis of their appearance, everyone should be concerned.

Winnipeg Copwatch is a grassroots, volunteer collective working to end police brutality. We go on regular street patrols, observing interactions between civilians and police to deter police violence. We also host Know Your Rights workshops and organize public events to promote community-based alternatives to police and critical thinking about the systemic role of police in society. We work with principles of solidarity, cooperation, decolonization, and anti-oppression. Our office is located in the Old Market Autonomous Zone at 91 Albert Street in Winnipeg's Exchange District. Contact us at 942-1588.