

## **Opinion Piece**

### **I am an Aboriginal woman, and my people are hurting.**

By Samantha Cooper, Sector Sustainability Coordinator, Community Legal Centres Queensland

This week I am tired. Not because of little ones, or because I work three jobs, or because I am studying and volunteering. Not because the weather is getting cold, the world is slowly crawling out of slumber after a global pandemic or because as women, we seem to do one thousand things at once.

Because I am an Aboriginal woman, and my people are hurting.

Reconciliation Week is exhausting at the best of times. Now more than ever, we are bombarded with tidal waves of racism and ignorance. It floods our social media, our news stories and our communities. This week as thousands of people take to the streets to protest police brutality after the horrifying murder of George Floyd and a New South Wales police officer is under investigation for throwing a young Aboriginal man not resisting to the ground on his face. I feel the weight of being an anti-racist crusader more than ever.

Fighting the good fight is hard. We are called upon for our time, our energy, our opinions, our stories- and willingly give all these things in the hope that it will make a difference.

There are strong parallels between what is happening in the US #BlackLivesMatter protests and what is happening in Australia. The systemic racism in Australia means my people are thirteen times more likely to be incarcerated than a non-indigenous person, we are thirty per cent of the prison population and only three per cent of the people of Australia.

These statistics are often used for political campaigns and news articles to provide some factual basis for a well-intentioned piece but let me tell you what these statistics mean. These statistics are my family. It means that every third person I walk past in jail as a lawyer one day is my brother or my sister.

Since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody in 1991 we have lost 432 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody. They are people. They have names and lives and families who miss them. #BlackLivesMatter is more than a hashtag on twitter for these families.

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These statistics are the reason I chose to pursue a career in the justice sector and to study the law. I watched an excellent lawyer and a compassionate police officer keep family members out of prison. As a People, we fear that one day someone in our family could be incarcerated as an Indigenous person, and we won't be able to protect them.

We have a global pandemic that goes unspoken year after year- it is violence against people of colour all over the world. In 2016 Will Smith said, 'racism isn't getting worse, it's getting filmed' and it is as accurate today as it was then. It feels, for my people, like another year has passed and nothing has changed. We are fighting the same fight today as we were ten and twenty years ago. We have been fighting for the same thing for generations. For equality.

Watching everything unfolding in America is horrifying, and the deep-seated parallels between these international headlines and our stories at home; of police brutality, corrective services ignorance and mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they are face-to-face with the justice system cannot be ignored- George Floyd in the US is our Aunty Tanya Day, Ms Dhu, Mr Ward, David Dungay Jr, Kumanjayi Walker.

We are exhausted by heartbreak that never seems to end and consistently called upon to comment.

This week be kind. Think before you speak. Don't tell of your anger over riots and looting, without remembering the First Nations people in this country experienced the same not too long ago, or the treatment of black people for hundreds of years which has resulted in thousands of lives lost, children removed, land pillaged, sacred places destroyed and intergenerational trauma for hundreds of years. You may not understand, but please stand with us.

**Ends**

**NOTES:**

Community Legal Centres Queensland is the state-wide peak body representing community legal centres in Queensland. Queensland community legal centres have 40 years of service delivery experience providing free information, advice and referral, casework and representation to the community. [www.communitylegalqld.org.au](http://www.communitylegalqld.org.au)

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