

## Indigenous people keen to be trained in filming interactions with police

*More than 20 communities show interest in Copwatch, which aims to generate better policing practices and curb abuse*



*The proposed Copwatch project is aimed at addressing complaints about over-policing and police abuse of Indigenous people. Photograph: Darren England/AAP*

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More than 20 Indigenous communities have expressed interest in a proposed training course on filming interactions with police in an attempt to address complaints about over-policing and police abuse.

The project, dubbed Copwatch, intends to send lawyers and media professionals to communities to provide training on safely recording interactions with police and other authority figures, and how to engage with social media. Participants would also learn about the use of such footage as evidence in any complaints or cases.

“It’s generally accepted around the world that the use of cameras makes people behave better,” said George Newhouse, principal solicitor for the human rights law firm behind Copwatch, the National Justice Project.

“That includes the police. The aim of the project is to generate better policing practices, better relationships between police and local communities, and to make the streets safer and give Aboriginal communities a voice.”

The justice project is about halfway to its \$50,000 crowdfunding goal.

Over-policing of Indigenous people in Australia has been linked to higher arrest and incarceration rates compared with non-Indigenous people. State and territory laws – such as the Northern Territory’s paperless arrests – are also criticised as discriminatory and targeting Indigenous people.

Newhouse said more than 20 Indigenous communities across Western Australia, the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Queensland had requested training but were afraid of ramifications if they were identified.

He said much of the training centred on how to be a citizen journalist and use social media “to highlight the injustices that they’re suffering”, but it also covered the ethical and practical implications of filming – including where it’s not allowed and who else might be caught up.

“When you’re recording an interaction between police and local community members, everyone’s behaviour is being recorded and there are implications not only for the police but for anyone on film.”

The project was triggered by the death of 14-year-old Elijah Doughty in WA last year, and the subsequent unrest.

“A number of community members approached us with stories of over-policing, harassment and frustration about the way the Aboriginal community were being treated in Kalgoorlie,” Newhouse said.

“We developed the project as a means of diverting that frustration away from throwing rocks at courthouses and damaging police houses to a more instructive way of engaging and demanding better community relations.”

Des Jones, the chair of the Murdi Paaki regional assembly, which represents 16 NSW communities, said they shouldn’t be the ones monitoring police but had to “because of ongoing abuse”.

“It’ll train them to be aware and when to lock-and-load their recording device.”

Amy McQuire, a Darumbal woman and Queensland-based journalist, said she had spoken to countless Indigenous people over her career who had been “deeply affected” by over-policing and police brutality.

“There are historical reasons why there is such a tense relationship between Aboriginal people and police, and it is not going to be solved by tokenistic platitudes and the occasional ‘good cop’,” she said.

“There needs to be justice. There has never been one police officer convicted over a black death in custody and this is keenly felt across Aboriginal Australia.”

McQuire said Copwatch would help inform Indigenous communities and provide tools to hold police accountable.

Shaun Harris, a campaigner for End Black Deaths in Custody, and an uncle of Ms Dhu, who died in police custody, said anything that amplified Indigenous voices was a positive step towards getting justice for people such as his niece.

“I hope that Copwatch will educate and empower our community to enforce rights that everybody has in this country,” he said.

An NSW police spokesman said they respected the rights of citizens to film in a public place.

He said there were existing avenues to file complaints about the conduct of officers but did not comment on allegations of over-policing in Indigenous communities.

Paul McCue, the president of the NT Police Association, said NT officers – who have begun using body-worn cameras – were “professionally trained, honest and hardworking officers who serve and protect the community every day”.

“Policing any community is a challenging and rewarding role, that can be dangerous and unpredictable. Each and every day there are positive interactions between our police and the wider Indigenous community, and our association would anticipate that this would continue to be the case.”