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## Pilbara boy run down by car raises vigilante claims

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By Paige Taylor



WA Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan. Picture: Ross Swanborough

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Would-be vigilantes in a car allegedly mowed down an Aboriginal boy on a pushbike in the Pilbara town of South Hedland, where thefts have stirred racial tensions, leaving him seriously injured in a ditch before burning their vehicle.

The 14-year-old is recovering after being airlifted to Perth for surgery on his mangled right leg. He was allegedly struck about 12.15am on May 3, sparking angry claims and counter-claims on one of the town's Facebook forums about crime and unsupervised youths out late at night. The boy's father says his son did nothing wrong on the night he was chased and knocked to the ground while cycling home.

Two men have been charged over the incident.

Police in the industrial port have not released their names, fearing further violence.

*The Weekend Australian* has been told police believe the men were out looking for youths whom they suspected of burglary when they knocked the boy off his bike.

Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan would not comment on the specific case yesterday but said he did not like the word vigilante.

“It lends credibility to what is really an expression of rage through criminal violence and as long as I’m commissioner, people who take the law into their own hands are going to be hunted down and charged,” he said.

Policing in the Pilbara town came under scrutiny after the death in custody of a 22-year-old Aboriginal woman locked up in South Hedland over unpaid fines in August 2014.

Evidence at her inquest included CCTV footage of the woman dying after the local hospital twice sent her back to the cells, declaring her fit to be in custody. The coroner’s report into the death of the woman, known for cultural reasons only as Miss Dhu, is yet to be handed down.

Most of the officers employed at South Hedland in 2014 have left as part of a turnover not related to the case. Deaths in Custody Watch Committee state chairman Marc Newhouse said Aboriginal families remained distrustful and frightened. “Aboriginal people in South Hedland are very, very fearful of going into custody or their kids going into custody, even more so than before Miss Dhu died in the lockup there,” Mr Newhouse said.

Three local police officers are being investigated by the police internal affairs unit following complaints from the parents of two 14-year-old boys that police left them stranded outside town on June 11.

“It has been alleged the officers drove them to the outskirts of South Hedland between the town site and an area known as Two Mile Camp,” said a police statement. A resident familiar with the case said police encountered the boys while responding to complaints of youths throwing rocks at cars.

Last week, Senior Sergeant Dean Snashall highlighted the problem of unsupervised youths in the area in an interview with local newspaper the *North West Telegraph*. A recent night-time operation to find children who were out after dark in the twin towns of Port Hedland and South Hedland found a surprising number, given the combined population of 15,000 people — police picked up 84 children aged from three to 14, the *North West Telegraph* reported.

Despite perceptions the town’s ice trade was contributing to a crime wave, there have been only small increases in some crimes in South Hedland and decreases in others. Mr O’Callaghan said drug dealers had targeted WA communities where there were indigenous populations, including South Hedland.

The commissioner helped the Barnett government shape drug transit route legislation to block movement of ice to regional areas.

“Indications are that West Australians are still the highest per capita users of meth in the country,” he said. However, he said significant social issues in South Hedland predated the arrival of a methamphetamine trade.