



Media release

Monday 22 August 2022 | FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Over 4000 strip searches conducted in NSW during COVID-19

Latest NSW Police strip-search figures show that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of people were still being subjected to strip searches, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and children disproportionately targeted.

The data obtained by Redfern Legal Centre (RLC) under access to information laws reveals that NSW Police conducted over 4,000 strip searches in just under a two-year period from 1 July 2020 to 24 May 2022.

“It is shocking to learn that even during the pandemic thousands of young people and First Nations people were subjected to harmful and invasive strip searches,” RLC police accountability senior solicitor, Samantha Lee said.

“It is simply unacceptable that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and children continue to be disproportionately over represented in these figures.

“Redfern Legal Centre welcomed NSW Police policy changes in 2020 designed to increase safeguards around strip searches, but with over 4000 invasive searches conducted since, even during periods of COVID lockdown, something is very wrong.

“To ensure public safety and provide adequate guidance to police we must see legislative change,” Ms Lee said.

The figures from the 2020-21 financial year, and the 2021-22 financial year (to 24 May 2022) reveal:

- For just under a two-year period, NSW Police conducted a total of 4,477 strip searches.
- Nothing illegal was found in nearly 60 percent of searches.
- For each year, an item was found in 42 percent of searches, with an illegal drug accounting for the majority of items found. NSW Police denied RLC’s request to access statistics about the type of drug and quantity found, and the charges laid.
- Males accounted for 4 times more strip searches than females.
- Those in their late teens (18-19 years) and young adults aged 20-29 years accounted for 41 per cent of strip searches in each financial year period: 1065 of 2568 in 2020-21; 773 of 1909 in 2021-22.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

- The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being strip searched was 9% (2020-21) and 11% (2021-24/5/22), while only comprising 3.4% of the NSW population.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children represented 4.2% (2020-21) and 3.6% (1 July 2021-24 May 2022) of the total of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander searches.
- Dubbo continues to be a place where the highest number of strip searches are carried out on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with a total of 46 searches conducted in less than two years.

Children

- There were 108 children strip searched (aged 10-17 years), with children representing 2.7% and 1.9% respectively of all strip searches in 2020-21 to 2021 to 24 May 2022.
- 18% of children strip searched from 1 July 2021 to 24 May 2022 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. In the 2020/21 financial year, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children represented 15% of all children searched (11 out of 70), and 22% in 2021-24/5/22 (8 out of 37).

Location

- The top five suburbs where the highest number of strip searches occurred include: Surry Hills (236), Sydney (181), Sydney Olympic Park (100), and Liverpool (92).
- Dubbo (80) accounted for the highest number of strip searches in a regional suburb.

Redfern Legal Centre applied to NSW Police for a breakdown of the number of strip searches in the field that resulted in a criminal charge, and the type of charge. Our application was denied. We appealed this decision to the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT) without success.

NSW Police statistics from 2016-17 to 2018-19 revealed that something unlawful is found between 32 to 37 percent of the time, with minor drug possession accounting for around 82 percentage of charges, supply 14 per cent of all charges and possession or use of a prohibited weapon less than 1.5 percent.

NSW Police have yet to provide a response to the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission report: *Inquiry into NSW Police Force strip search practices*. The report was tabled in NSW Parliament in December 2020, which contains 25 recommendations to address systemic problems with strip search practice.

In July, RLC and Slater and Gordon launched class action proceedings against the State of NSW on behalf of people who have been invasively and unlawfully searched by police at music festivals over the past six years.

With festivals and other major events once again being held in NSW, the need for law reform to address this invasive and potentially unlawful practice is more urgent than ever.

RLC Police Accountability Solicitor Samantha Lee is available for interview. Contact Finn O'Keefe, RLC Communications Manager: 0424 548 019 | finn@rlc.org.au