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Young women subjected to traumatic number of unnecessary strip searches

Under access to information laws, Redfern Legal Centre has obtained statistics from NSW Police on the number of females that have been strip searched during the financial years: 2016-2017, 2017-2018 and 2018-2019.

The statistics break-down the data by: age, racial appearance, no item found, drug dog detection and no item found after drug dog detection.

Redfern Legal Centre also sought a break-down of the number of females that were requested to lift breasts during a strip searches, but was informed the information is not recorded. Redfern Legal Centre also sought a break-down of the number of females that were requested to squat during a strip search, but was informed police *“cannot source this information without reading each event narrative which is not possible due to the volume.”*

The statistics obtained reveal that over a three-year period there were 3,919 females strip searched. Two thirds of these strip searches (2,569) found nothing – 66 percent on average.

Of the total number of strip searches, school age children (12 to 17 years) accounted for 3% of searches (122). These figures being:

- two girls aged 12-years
- eight girls aged 13-years
- seven girls aged 14-years
- 21 girls aged 15-years
- 34 girls aged 16-years
- 50 girls aged 17-years.

Young women aged 25 years and younger accounted for 48 % of the total searches (1895). The oldest woman strip searched was aged 72.

In 28% of the total strip searches (1095), drug dog detection was the reason for the type search. Of these searches 56% found nothing.

Out of the total number of females’ strip searched the females were categorised by police as being the following ‘racial appearance’: Caucasian - 71 %, followed by Aboriginal - 10 %, East Asian - 6 % and Middle Eastern – 3 %.

Samantha Lee, Head of Police Accountability Practice at Redfern Legal Centre, said “Girls as young as twelve and thirteen, some just finishing primary school, are being taken by police to a strange place and ordered by someone with a huge amount of power to take off their clothes.”

“There is no doubt these young women would have been scared, some terrified and most having no idea of their legal rights.”

“We know from the recent LECC hearings, that young women are being asked to squat, and in the LECC case, an officer got on the ground and looked underneath the young woman. How many other young women have been subjected to such concerning police practice?”

“The figures also reveal that women of Aboriginal and East Asian appearance account for the largest appearance category after women of Caucasian appearance.”

“Young children are particularly vulnerable and at risk of harm from being strip searched. The current legal thresholds and procedures fail to fully protect children from such harm.

“To protect children the law must be changed to prohibit the strip searching of children, unless a court order is obtained.”

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