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Title:

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Date:

2020-05-21

Citation:

McDonald, D. (2020). Expanding PSOs: smarter deployment or coercive creepage?. The Age.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/242422>

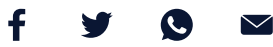
NATIONAL VICTORIA CRIME

## OPINION

# Expanding PSOs: smarter deployment or coercive creepage?

By Dave McDonald

May 21, 2020 – 4.29pm



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On Thursday [The Age reported on a proposal to significantly expand the powers and function of Protective Services Officers](#). In March this year the Victorian government invoked a state of emergency in response to COVID-19. Part of this saw an expansion in the deployment of PSOs.



PSOs have been deployed to the Melbourne and Geelong CBDs and shopping strips and centres in Dandenong, Frankston and Box Hill. JASON SOUTH

Originally located at train stations from 6pm daily until last trains, under Victoria's state of emergency they have also been patrolling retail and business areas throughout Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo. They wear navy uniforms and carry guns. They look a lot like the police, and so do their powers.

The announcement that this expansion will continue beyond the state of emergency may be a welcome development for some. For example, Angus Nardi, the chief executive of the Shopping Centre Council of Australia, was quoted as saying, "The visible presence of PSOs in shopping centres during COVID-19 has been incredibly positive for community assurance and safety, and we strongly support their presence and engagement in the long term."

We can safely say that retail businesses enjoy having taxpayer-funded security patrolling their private spaces. However, the question of whether Victorian citizens should be satisfied with this development is less straightforward.

The use of law enforcement to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 has been a subject of debate. For example, people have received hefty infringement notices for breaching social distancing rules. In some of these instances, the breaches they are alleged to have committed have been questionable. In response, [Deputy Commissioner Shane Patton called on his officers to exercise more discretion](#). He has also committed to review every infringement notice. While this debate has largely centred on police, we have reason to worry about PSOs as well.

What we are seeing is an expansion of PSOs into areas that, while first enabled in the context of COVID-19, are now proposed to remain with us. That is, the emergency will become the norm. If this does occur, police have already indicated they will need resources to recruit more PSOs. Is this a problem? At the very least, it raises a series of questions that demand closer inspection.

PSOs were first deployed across the train network by the former Coalition government in 2011. The objective was to deter crime and antisocial behaviour, improve perceptions of safety, and enhance crime prevention. By patrolling stations, the idea was that they would inspire greater confidence on trains after dark.

While a visible security presence may make people feel subjectively safer, whether they actually are is more complicated. As the Victorian Auditor-General noted in the 2016 evaluation of PSOs, putting aside how people feel "it is not clear whether safety has actually improved".

This overlaps with the question of whether PSOs are an effective resource. Many Victorians will have asked themselves this question when they have seen PSOs on quiet train platforms at night.

Data on infringements issued by PSOs suggests they do identify antisocial behaviour and fine people accordingly. They have the power to arrest, and to search people and their property.

Collectively they issue around 20,000 infringement notices annually. From this it might sound like they are encountering a lot of antisocial behaviour. However, it is overwhelmingly minor. Further, their purpose has never been to recuperate the expense of their provision through the fines.

Cost can also be measured in other ways. In 2016, the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission undertook a review of corruption and misconduct risks. The areas of risk it identified included assault and improper use of force,

unauthorised access and disclosure of information, and predatory behaviour towards the public.

These costs are even more significant for vulnerable communities that are more disproportionately affected. For example, the impact can be severely felt by young people, people with drug or alcohol problems, and those experiencing homelessness, mental illness and disability.

Although IBAC didn't say it, Aboriginal people are particularly at risk of this kind of over-policing, as are people from racial and ethnic minorities more generally. These are the people who can least afford – financially and otherwise – the style of law enforcement that IBAC has warned against.

This is compounded by a lack of accountability. In Victoria, our system of oversight is far from perfect. This is something even the Parliament has recognised.

In 2018 the parliamentary committee that oversees IBAC found that our system of complaints and oversight needs significant improvement. This is the system that is supposed to keep PSOs accountable.

While the committee recommended improvements in transparency, effectiveness and efficiency, the government is still yet to implement these. Evidently this is not preventing it from expanding the deployment of PSOs beyond the state of emergency.

All of this is what criminologists refer to as net-widening. Overwhelmingly, the behaviours that PSOs come into contact with tend to be minor. In the wake of significant decreases in patronage across the public transport system due to COVID-19, PSOs are being used in new ways. The major benefactors are commercial interests. Those who are already vulnerable and disenfranchised are also those with the most the lose. We should all be concerned about this.

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