

## VPD's racist profiling and war on the poor

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"These are people that come from another country and are parasites."

This statement, from Vancouver Police Department (VPD) Inspector Val Harrison, belies the hateful and racist motivations behind the systemic harassment and brutal treatment of Latino residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). Her characterisation of the individuals arrested in the VPD's latest public display of disdain for Latinos in the DTES as 'parasitic' is only fitting. The campaign the VPD has been waging against all poor people of colour in and out of the DTES can only be described as one of extermination.

The palatable contempt expressed by Harrison in her address to the media has carried well, with not one reasonable voice being aired or heard. It is completely consistent not only with the political agenda of the police, but also that of poverty pimps, healthcare providers and politicians, to reinforce the idea that a specific population (i.e. Latinos) are responsible for the seemingly invincible open-air drug trade of the DTES. Rather than indict themselves in the creation and maintenance of a drug ghetto, the 'alien' people of colour are once again targeted for attack.

Currently there is a make-believe 'crackdown on Honduran drug dealers.' In the February 9th, 2005 edition of the Vancouver Province, the names of over a dozen persons charged, but not convicted, of drug dealing were printed. The article went on to describe the strategy employed by the VPD and Canadian Immigration system in a quote from immigration lawyer Richond Kurland, "You detain him on site and keep him detained until you physically deliver him from whence he came." What Kurland doesn't mention, however, is the physical and structural violence incurred against these alleged drug dealers for being poor, which is further intensified by rampant and accepted racial profiling from the VPD and other state institutions.

The reality on the street is that there is no special crackdown. Latinos have their heads cracked against the curbs of Vancouver day in, day out. Omar, an organiser for Latinos in Action say, "Sure, we don't deny that there are Latino brothers and sisters dealing drugs, but we also don't demonize those who do. You have to understand that we come from a very poor country and a lot of people will do almost anything to feed their families."

Omar is from Honduras, as are many men and women who now find themselves in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). He went on to explain that following Hurricane Mitch, which devastated Central America in 1998, there was a mass migration of newly homeless and landless families who fought their way into Fortress North America to seek economic stability. Many were detained and deported back to Honduras, where the unemployment rate is over 60%.

The VPD estimate that 400 Honduran adults who survived the 3,200-mile journey to Vancouver are currently involved in the drug trade. No one outside the VPD can verify that number, or any other census or statistics relating to Latinos living in the DTES. This is because the majority live underground in a world where there is no access to healthcare, legal employment or social assistance. Most Latinos live in fear of being targeted as a drug dealer, as that would lead to an arrest and certainly to deportation. For people living without status in this country, there is not even the illusion of justice - the immigration minister can sign a special certificate to oust a person even if they have not been convicted of any crime that they have been charged with and regardless of conditions they face upon deportation.

Prior to the City-Wide Enforcement Team (CET), a policing initiative that is behind the deployment of 50 additional police in the DTES in April of 2003, the VPD had been working alongside the RCMP and officers from Canadian Immigration. 'Operation Torpedo' has often mistakenly been described as an effort to break up the concentration of drug use on the corner of Main and Hastings. In reality, it was a push to collect evidence (however circumstantial) to facilitate a mass arrest of suspected Latino drug dealers.

Jaime Cortez describes his encounter with officers working on Operation Torpedo, "I had just gotten back from Calgary where I used to live for like 10 years. When I came down town to see what was going on a blue van pulled me over and three guys forced me to the side. When I asked what the fuck was going on they said they had a picture of me dealing drugs and they were gonna deport my Spic ass. I asked them where they got the picture and they said they took it two weeks ago. They then showed me a picture that was all blurred cause they must have taken it from a moving car. They said I was the blur with the hat on. I was wearing a hat but I was like two feet taller than that guy. Luckily I still had my greyhound bus ticket in my pocket. The receipt proved I had been away for almost a month and that I just got back."

In the underground community of Latinos in the DTES, the blue van had become synonymous with the 'disappearances'. No one knows how many people were disappeared by Operation Torpedo, and almost no one cares to ask.

The Anti-Poverty Committee (APC) has been working closely with the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, No One Is Illegal and Latinos in Action for years. We organise around police brutality with the understanding that police violence is racist and sexist because it is poor people of colour who are targeted in the drug war; and that the drug war is just a flank of the larger class war. When the cops shoot homeless aboriginal persons 15 times in a back alley, the APC is there to denounce this system that applauds the murders. When people are stolen from the street and deported because they are poor, the APC will fight with those communities for real justice.

Throughout the month of March, from International Women's Day through the International Day Against Police Brutality and the International Day Against Racism, the APC invites you to participate in a series of forums we have been calling the People's Inquiry into Police Violence and Compliance. Within this broader theme, we will be focusing on issues as they affect women, people of colour and people living in poverty. To find out more check out our website at [apc.resist.ca](http://apc.resist.ca).