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Gay-hate crime police to dump FBI investigation tool



Former police gay liaison co-ordinator Sue Thompson has welcomed the axing of the FBI methodology. Picture: Adam Taylor

By **RICK FENELEY**

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Police reviewing 88 deaths put forward as possible gay-hate murders will move to replace an FBI tool for assessing such crimes, a potential breakthrough for campaigners who feared most of the “epidemic” of cases would be whitewashed.

NSW Police Assistant Commissioner Tony Crandell — responding to a report on the same 88 deaths by the leading LGBTI health advocacy ACON — confirmed Strike Force Parrabell would recommend a better assessment tool for “bias” crimes.

The ACON report, *In Pursuit of Truth and Justice*, to be released today, covers a “shameful episode” from the 1970s to the 90s, when hundreds of gay men suffered - extreme violence, sometimes by teenage gangs, in which “the difference between assault and murder was often slender”.

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It calls on police, the judiciary and politicians to confront the truth about failed investigations and past homophobic prejudices. It asks the NSW parliament “and/or” police to apologise for “inadequate or slow” responses, including dismissing murders as suicides or misadventures.

Mr Crandell, the force’s leader on LGBTI matters, told *The Australian*: “Like ACON, the NSW Police Force responded to community activism.” It established Operation Parrabell in 2013, bolstered it in 2015 with nine specialist investigators, then elevated it last year to a “strike force”. Its findings in “coming weeks” are expected to conclude how many of the 88 cases should be sent to the unsolved homicide team for reinvestigation. This follows homicide police statements that as few as eight of the deaths might fit the gay-hate category. Parrabell will also release an independent academic review of its work.

“Our current bias assessment tools are not practical for everyday police officers on the frontline,” Mr Crandell said. A new system would ensure “bias motivation” is considered in every investigation.

This is welcomed by the two experts from whose research the 88 cases were assembled: lawyer Sue Thompson, the police force’s former gay liaison co-ordinator, and criminologist Stephen Tomsen.

They feared Parrabell would “rewrite history” and dismiss many cases if it stuck with the “flawed” FBI methodology. They argue the tool is designed for gathering statistics on crimes for which there is clear evidence of the perpetrators’ extremist

motives, such as terrorists. Gay-gate killers rarely leave such a convenient trail, they say.

Their concerns were shared by former NSW homicide detective Steve Page, who worked pro bono for American Steve Johnson as he campaigned to prove his gay brother, Scott, did not commit suicide by leaping naked from a North Head cliff in 1988.

In 2013, Operation Parrabell concluded the remote gay beat was an unlikely location for a gay-hate attack. But last November State Coroner Michael Barnes's historic third inquest into the case rejected the police force's call for an open finding, instead concluding at least two assailants, motivated by gay hatred, attacked Scott.

"Police had applied the FBI methodology in the case," Mr Page told *The Australian*, "and it led them to the incorrect conclusion ... whereas all the evidence ... was that Scott died at a gay beat frequented not only by homosexual men but by gay-bashing gangs ... So I welcome this plan for a different tool."

Mr Page headed Strike Force Taradale, which led to an inquest finding in 2005 of at least two gay-hate murders — of newsreader Ross Warren and barman John Russell — at a gay beat on the Bondi-Tamarama cliffs in 1989. The coroner found the initial police work "lacklustre" and "shameful".

The ACON report says: "Half of the 88 killings took place between 1987 and 1993 when AIDS was hitting its peak in terms of an irrational public 'moral panic'."

Mr Crandell said the force formally apologised in 2016, not only to "the 78ers" brutalised by police in the first Mardi Gras "but also to the entire LGBTI community ... (but) from the reading of the (Parrabell) cases, there is not sufficient evidence of misbehaviour or deliberate inaction from NSW Police Force that would warrant a further, broader apology."

Mr Johnson applauded the force's "concern for the deaths of gay men in those terrible decades, though Parrabell's criteria must be flawed since it ruled out my brother's death as gay-hate related".

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