

Unheard no more: Australia's racism problem on global display



David Dungay jnr's mother, Leetona, leads a Black Lives Matter rally in Sydney in December 2020.

By Cameron Gooley
October 25,

An Aboriginal man is slammed into a wall by two police officers. Another thrown off his feet, side first into an open door. A third dragged by officers out of the back of a van. A fourth lifted entirely off the ground and carried around a police station by at least five officers.

They're just a few moments shown in the first harrowing minutes of a new half-hour documentary series. The first episode is on Indigenous deaths in custody, focusing on the 2015 death of David Dungay jnr.

The scene is set with a smattering of violence and blurred faces, and a mix of newsreader voiceovers: the incarceration rates of First Nations people in Australia are a "humanitarian crisis". The opening montage ends with a two-sentence graphic.

"Over 474 Indigenous deaths in custody since 1991. 0 convictions."

It's a startling statistic that *Unheard's* creator Shahn Devendran wants viewers to think long and hard about. Thirty years ago the Australian government held a royal

commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody – so how is it that so many people have died since? Why has no one ever faced criminal consequences? And how has the Indigenous incarceration rate doubled since then?

“We start each episode with really exploring the human element and the human impact of this kind of behaviour and then when we break out the statistics you really see the broader issues behind it and how a lot of these incidents come from systemic racism,” Devendran said.

For the first episode, the creators speak to the family of David Dungay jnr, who died in Sydney’s Long Bay Jail in 2015. The 26-year-old Dunghutti man died shortly after guards pinned him down because he wouldn’t stop eating biscuits. Body camera footage of the moment is played for the audience, including his screams: “I can’t breathe”.

While distressing, the use of the footage is not gratuitous. Dungay's family collaborated with the production team to have the story told on their terms.

“We worked closely with the family to make sure they were comfortable with it at every stage, there were a lot of things that we omitted from the documentary series for that reason, but I think it's important that people see the truth,” Devandran said.

“We made sure that the creative teams behind each of the episodes were representative of those particular communities, so for the Indigenous episodes for example we had Jack Steele who is a Wiradjuri writer, producer, and director.”

While an important first episode, it's only one topic investigated in the six-part series. Other episodes deal with contemporary social topics, including Islamophobia and asylum seekers.

Unusually for an Australian documentary, *Unheard* was made outside of the ABC, SBS, or NITV. Rather, it’s a collaboration between online publisher LADbible and streaming service Amazon Prime Video. According to Devendran, who is also the head of originals at LADbible Australia, the decision to work with Amazon was made to maximise its global audience. Amazon Prime has more than 175 million active subscribers while LADBible content is displayed to about half a billion people.

“I think what’s important is not just preaching to the choir here in Australia ... I’m not sure that everyone around the world understands or is aware of what’s going on here in Australia,” Devendran said.



Series creator Shahn Devendran believes the world needs to know about the structural racism in Australia.

“We hope at the end of each episode... we can then funnel them to the platforms of our partners to support – whether that’s petitions, donations, volunteer programs – and really put a global focus on these issues that potentially could put pressure on the decision-makers.”

The first two episodes use their 30 minutes well. They simplify the issues well enough for the global audience Devendran is aiming for, while providing powerful human narratives to kickstart their discussions. The content of the episodes is important, and while not groundbreaking for regular watchers of Australian public broadcasting, *Unheard* is targeting a wider audience.

The remaining episodes cover attacks towards Asian people during the COVID-19 pandemic, Islamophobia, the vilification of the African community, the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees, and the targeting of Indigenous youth.

***Unheard* is on Amazon Prime Video from Friday. The first two episodes will be available free.**