Adapting Fingerprints Within the NSW Police Force:
An Historical Examination of the Geographical Barriers and Implications for Rural and Regional Policing

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Abstract

In the 1890s and 1900s, societies in Western nations, and in particular densely populated cities like London and Paris, became overtly concerned with the need to identify 'habitual criminals'. In response, in 1903, NSW became the first Australian state to develop a designated fingerprint section or bureau within their police force, which, following international trends, was very much focused on metropolitan NSW. According to Cauchi and Knepper (2009), fingerprint technology as a form of criminal identification "was *the* mark of cosmopolitan police organization" (p. 74). Criminal identification was principally identified as a problem in the rapidly growing cities, and thus, fingerprinting resources were directed to those areas. As a result, for the first few decades of use, fingerprint identification in rural and regional areas was limited. For example, only officers in metropolitan NSW were trained in fingerprint identification and comparison methods, and police around regional NSW were expected to take finger-print exhibits to metropolitan areas for analysis. The limitations in technology available during the initial period of fingerprinting resulted in regional NSW police facing more barriers to the use of fingerprint identification technology than their metropolitan counterparts. To understand these barriers and the limitations of fingerprinting in rural areas, this paper explores the initial introduction of fingerprinting into the NSW Police system from 1903-1930, focusing upon the challenges and barriers experienced by regional police agencies in using what is now one of the most common forensic identification tools available to police worldwide.

Keywords: fingerprints; NSW Police; identification; rural

In the 1890s and 1900s, information on the new forensic identification tool, *fingerprinting*, rapidly circulated throughout the world's media outlets. First introduced in Australia in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in 1903, fingerprinting provided numerous advantages over previous similar tools and techniques, with the possibility of error in using the system to identify individuals thought to be "absolutely eliminated" (Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate, 1902, p. 9). However, not all regions within the state had immediate access to fingerprinting. Initially, only officers in metropolitan NSW were trained in fingerprint identification and comparison methods, and with most fingerprinting resources based in Sydney, there were logistical barriers to police in rural areas who hoped to use the system. To understand these issues, and assess the implications of these on the development of fingerprinting in rural areas, this paper will explore the introduction of fingerprinting in NSW during the period of 1903-1930, and considers how factors such as criminological thinking of the era, the media focus on metropolitan areas, technological limitations, combined with the geographically dispersed population centres throughout NSW, all combined to serve as a barrier that limited the viability of fingerprint identification beyond the Sydney metropolitan area.

Fingerprinting rapidly rose to prominence in the international law enforcement community throughout the 1890s and 1900s. While Alphonse Bertillon's system of anthropometry [also known as Bertillonage] was widely celebrated throughout the 1880s, in many places it was soon supplemented, and then replaced, by fingerprinting. In 1893 Edward Richard Henry, Inspector General of the Bengal Police, initially added thumb prints to his anthropometric records, then later, with the help of Francis Galton and colleagues such as Chandra Bose and Qazi Azizul Haque, developed what became known as the Henry Classification Method for identification of individuals entirely via fingerprints. While various other methods and systems were being developed around the world at the same time, Henry's system was the basis for that later adopted in NSW. The critical success of fingerprinting in early prominent cases, such as that of Francisca Rojas in Argentina in 1892, combined with the discrediting of anthropometry, most notably via the American Will West case of 1902, also helped promote fingerprinting as a more reliable forensic tool, or at least, a reliable tool for use in large metropolitan areas. Indeed, throughout much of the nineteenth century, advances in policing and criminal identification had principally focused on large *metropolitan* areas around the world. London, Paris, Kolkata, and Buenos Aires had been focal points for the development of registries of distinctive marks, anthropometry, and fingerprinting systems. In 1903, Sydney, with a population of just over half a million people, experienced similar social concerns with crime and justice.

Australia was perceived at the time as part of the 'British world', and, with advances in printing and distribution methods, Australian newspaper syndicates reported extensively on news from across the Empire (Potter, 2003). As Simon Potter (2003) argued:

> […] the press brought an unparalleled level of reciprocity to the imperial connection. United Kingdom journalists wrote for Dominion newspapers; colonial journalists provided British papers with the vast majority of their reports from the Dominions;

and papers in the settler colonies looked to journalists in the other Dominions to provide news. (p. 191)

Events and issues taking place in Britain then, were printed and expressed as of relevance to Australian readers. This helped retain those kinship links with Britain, reinforced British identities within Australia, and helped create a sense of commonality of ideas and customs (Potter, 2003). Of particular pertinence, reports on fascinating scientific developments and famous criminal cases of the 1890s and 1900s were widely reported within the Australian press, and, as part of this, the excitement and fear cultivated in Britain were replicated within Australia. Thus, throughout the late-nineteenth century, as British newspapers increasingly reported on fears of habitual criminals and difficulties identifying and apprehending increasingly mobile criminals in the burgeoning metropolises, so too were these fears increasingly replicated within Australian cities such as Sydney and Melbourne (The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, 1839; Macleay Argus, 1888; The Daily Telegraph, 1907). However, the situation was different in rural areas. Australians had long perceived a social, cultural and political divide between 'city' and 'country', and, as detailed below, one of the areas where that divide was most evident was in the nature of crime and policing.

Reflecting that historical city and country divide, historical criminology has also long favoured urban studies (Donnermeyer et al., 2013). Internationally, Weisheit and Wells (1996) noted that until the end of the twentieth century, rural criminology had "received little attention" (p, 379), while within Australia, Carrington et al. (2014) argued that one of the "significant shortcomings" of criminology was its "urban-centric bias" (p. 464). As far as Australian historical criminology is concerned, this is understandable, as for much of this history, particularly the late-colonial and early-federal era, most of the critical policing developments (and most of the evidence we have available) in New South Wales revolved around Sydney. The impact of this dominant urban/metropolitan focus is an historical narrative of policing progress and development. If we probe closely, however, we find a different story in rural areas. As Jobes et al. (2001) noted, historically, rural law enforcement in Australia was:

> […] often harshly administered against lower social and economic groups, both white and people of colour. Rigid and brutal control, whether formally or informally sanctioned, constituted an invasion against Indigenous people […] (p. 5)

While much of the frontier conflict in NSW had subsided by the 1890s, police in rural areas continued to deal with the long-term effects of that violent past, while also struggling with access to the technology and resources that their metropolitan counterparts enjoyed. While previous studies in Australian rural criminology have highlighted many of these differences (see for example O'Connor and Gray, 1989), the early history of fingerprinting in those rural areas remains largely absent. This is even more important given that, in the era under investigation here, the majority of the population of Australia lived in rural and regional areas. While today approximately 85% of people live in metropolitan areas, in 1911

the population of major capital cities was just 40.3%, with the remaining 59.7% living in areas defined as 'regional cities and towns' with populations greater than 200 [44.7%], 'small localities' of 50-200 persons [10.1%] and 'rural' (non-urbanised) areas [4.8%] (Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, 2014).[1]

In addressing the history of fingerprinting in rural NSW, we first acknowledge the complexities and inherent difficulties in satisfactorily defining 'rurality', particularly within the historical context of the early twentieth century. Scott and Hogg (2015) note that "there is a common tendency in everyday usage to use rural as a form of shorthand encompassing all spaces outside cities" (p. 172), and many scholars of rural crime have established solid foundations for historical and contemporary analysis (see for example Harkness et al, 2016). However, for the purpose of understanding the history of fingerprinting in New South Wales, it is practical to draw on a distinction similar to that noted by Scott and Hogg, for, as explored below, developments in fingerprinting in this era can effectively be divided into 'metropolitan Sydney' and 'everywhere else outside Sydney'. While we recognise that some regional centres, such as Wollongong (population of 4,660 in 1911), Wagga Wagga (population of 6,419 in 1911), Newcastle (population of 11,610 in 1911), and Goulburn (population of 10,023 in 1911) (ABS, 1911) were becoming increasingly urbanised during this era, in many ways they still suffered from the issues that other small rural areas experienced in terms of access to fingerprinting resources, by virtue of being outside metropolitan Sydney. They thus share a similar history of experiences and have been included in our consideration of 'rural' for the purposes of this analysis.

Our geographical focus then, effectively on 'everywhere else outside Sydney', provided the potential for a rich and diverse source base. In particular, we focused our attention on annual police reports from the NSW Police Department, which were assessed in combination with a diverse range of print media from the era (which includes reports on court cases). This gives us a picture of both the *ideas* around fingerprinting that were promulgated by the press, combined with the *de facto* practises taking place throughout the state. This also complements similar international sources derived from our ongoing research into the international history of fingerprinting and forensic identification. While these sources provide valuable insight into this history, they are not without some limitations. As noted above, Australian newspapers of the early twentieth century drew heavily on British Imperial networks which were prone to sensationalism. Reports often contained exaggeration and misinformation, and are often unreliable as a source of factual information. In contrast, however, they provide a good sense of how ideas were publicised at the time, they reveal broader fears and concerns within communities, and they can help shed light on some of broader social and criminological developments and the information conveyed by NSW Police Department reports.

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[1] It should be noted that the figures relating to 'metropolitan areas' should not be directly compared against 'major capital cities', but they are nonetheless indicative. For a more detailed breakdown of this data see Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (2014, pp. 55-89).

The NSW Police Department Reports, produced annually, tend to focus on statistical information and provide a general impression of criminal data from across the state, but the data is limited. For example, there is no information on details such as the number of offences relating to fingerprinting within particular regions, nor of false-positive identifications. While successive Inspector-Generals regularly made efforts in their reports to acknowledge the work in 'country areas', the data (and supporting examples and anecdotes) mostly provides details about the situation in metropolitan Sydney. Indeed, this *metropolitan focus* is a central factor in the history of fingerprinting in rural areas. Put bluntly, and detailed below, rural police struggled to utilise fingerprinting to its full extent because fingerprinting was perceived as a solution to *metropolitan* types of crime, and *metropolitan* criminals, and thus, fingerprinting resources and efforts were focused on *metropolitan* Sydney. The net result was a lot of silence surrounding the development of fingerprinting in rural areas, and we are thus often resolved to reading between the lines and piecing together various forms of historical evidence to understand this history.

The History of Rural Policing and Crime

Throughout much of the state's colonial history, policing efforts in NSW focused overwhelmingly on Sydney. In 1788 Sydney became the first site of European settlement in Australia, and it has remained the colony's (and later state's) central focal point for administration since. Sydney has also always remained the largest urban centre in NSW, far eclipsing in size and population other urban centres of the colony/state, and, understandably, witnessing crime of the highest magnitude. In contrast, throughout this history, rural NSW has struggled to secure comparable policing resources. As early as 1825, the magistrates in Sydney met to discuss the 'problem' of the police system in rural districts, which was "insufficient in its principle, and inadequate in its effects" (O'Sullivan, 1979, pp. l-2 cited in O'Donnell, 1993, p. 16).

In 1862 the *Police Regulation Act* created the New South Wales Police Force, which amalgamated all existing police forces in NSW into one organisation. Sub-districts were created across the state, each controlled by Police Inspectors, and by 1872 there were approximately 803 policemen across the state, and prisoners began to be photographed. This period also saw a large growth in the population of NSW, and Sydney in particular. Between the 1850s and 1890 the population of Sydney increased from 54,000 to almost half a million, and by 1890 "Sydney was one of the world's great metropolitan centres, and a magnet for economic activity within the state" (O'Donnell, 1993, p. 24). In the 1850s, completion of railway lines from Sydney to what is now considered the outer suburbs of Sydney facilitated the expansion of the colony, while also assisting in the rapid movement of police and the escorting of prisoners. Between 1862 and 1872 seventy new Police Stations were created across NSW, primarily in 'Rural Districts' "chiefly to afford protection … [as] the population increased, or to provide for newly developed Gold Fields" (NSW Police Department, 1872, p. 1).

By 1903, there were ten main police divisions throughout the state, with a separate Detective Branch and Police Depot. Table 1 highlights the differences in resources available throughout the state's divisions; those resources both reflected the nature of crime and of policing needs in those areas, and subsequently shaped the strategies that could practically be employed in each division. For example, the metropolitan police had no horses, despite having 18 'mounted police officers'; and the city not only had the largest amount of foot officers in any one district, but also had over half the entire foot patrol officers in the state. Even including mounted police, which were focused in rural areas; the metropolitan police force accounted for over 40% of the total NSW police department. There was also a sharp contrast between the type of police available in the city compared to rural areas, particularly as the Detective Branch was located in metropolitan Sydney. For example, while the metropolitan district alone had 29 Sergeants, 1st Class, all other areas (excluding Detectives and the Depot) had a combined total of 11 Sergeants, 1st Class. Not surprisingly, there were more senior officers in the mounted police department occupying positions in rural areas (a total of nine across the rural districts, with one in each district, compared to three in metropolitan areas).

Table 1

Detail of strength of New South Wales Police, 31 December 1903

Police division	Number of stations	Number of horses	Number of mounted police	Number of foot police	Total number of officers
Metropolitan	90		18	892	910
Northern	58	134	79	55	134
Southern	74	156	117	63	180
Eastern	69	54	56	80	136
Western	81	160	137	84	221
Bourke	33	105	57	18	75
North-Eastern	90	99	86	139	225
North-Western	39	117	60	38	98
South-Western	43	96	71	50	121
Murray	35	74	56	45	101
Detective Branch	1	1	2	21	23
Police Depot	1	49	28	18	46
Total	614	1,045	468	1,503	2,270

Source: NSW Police Department (1904, p. 16)

According to Peter Grabosky (1974), the period from 1890 to 1910 generally saw a "significant decline in criminality" in NSW (p. 219). Grabosky argued that legislative reforms were improving working conditions, pension schemes were established, and free and compulsory education (introduced in 1880) was enhancing "the social and economic

opportunities of colonial youth", all of which culminated in what Grabosky called an alleviation of 'social strain', and the encouragement of New South Welshmen "to view their government as more legitimate, with obvious effects on the incidence of criminal behaviour" (p. 219). In 1903, the same year the Finger-print Branch was created, the NSW Police Department (1904) reported on crime rates that revealed reductions in overall crime. For example, between 1902 and 1903, there were decreases in cases of manslaughter (decrease of four), criminal assaults on young girls (decrease of 17), and in burglary and embezzlement (decrease of 162).

However, this era in general also saw "sharp increases in rates of acquisitive crime" in highly urbanised areas, linked to "demographic and economic developments" (Grabosky, 1974, p. 219). Throughout the nineteenth century, industrialisation had fuelled massive population growth in the world's cities, and Sydney was no exception. Globally, those situations 'produced conditions of anonymity' which fuelled social fears of 'habitual criminals'. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, it was difficult for an individual to disguise their identity, even in highly urban areas. Most offenders were known within their local communities and identification was principally visual and went unchallenged. However, increasing urbanisation and social mobility throughout the nineteenth century transformed that. As early as 1839, *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* reported on 'habitual criminals' as:

> […] the most numerous class of offenders [...] who compose what is properly called the criminal population of this country, namely, irregular thieves, pickpockets, burglars, and all persons who gain their livelihood by the repetition of offences, and who consequently have lost all feelings of moral aversion to crime, and can only be restrained by fear. (p. 2)

During the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s, social concerns around habitual criminals in New South Wales reached a crescendo. The *Macleay Argus* reported on 21 July 1888 that "These habitual criminals, these seasoned offenders required, for the protection of society, some punishment that will be absolutely deterrent; and it almost seems that the only remedy is perpetual imprisonment" (p. 4). Habitual criminals were, understandably, also a concern for the police, and the subject of 'habitual criminals' regularly featured in NSW Police Reports. For example, the topic of 'Habitual criminals' was a designated subject for discussion at the conference of the heads of the Police Forces of the Commonwealth, held in October 1903 (NSW Police Department, 1904, p. 4). The popular press of the state widely reported that, just as society had created the problem of the habitual criminal, so too could society find a solution. Some newspapers suggested stricter deterrents in the form of harsher punishments, while others suggested more lenient punishments and opportunities for education and trade training. However, judicial authorities, grounded in a strong history of colonial record keeping and identification, desired enhanced ways to keep records on those habitual criminals, and many believed their solution to the problem was in the science of fingerprinting, the exciting news of which was gradually flowing into New South Wales from Great Britain.

Fingerprinting then, was seen as a solution to the perceived problem of the habitual criminal that was plaguing the world's larger metropolises. Habitual criminals were perceived as increasingly mobile, unknown to the communities within which they committed their crimes, and thus, increasingly able to disguise their identity and elude arrest. This was, principally, an issue for metropolitan Sydney. Police in Sydney struggled most with the identification and apprehension of suspects; conversely, the issue of rural crime, and the identification of suspects in regional areas, scarcely featured in these discussions. Thus, as detailed below, the Finger Print Bureau (later the Finger-print Branch) was established in Sydney in 1903, and immediately focused on addressing crime and criminal identification within the Sydney metropolitan area.

Internationally, fingerprinting was primarily adopted as a tool for the identification of individuals in those larger metropolises. As noted above, it first supplemented and then replaced anthropometry as the principal identification tool used by police. The fact that it could be used as a forensic tool, to link individuals to crime scenes via their fingerprints, was *initially* a secondary consideration. Nonetheless, this forensic value was an important feature that was particularly emphasised in early press reports of fingerprinting. For example, in 1902, the *Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* (1902) reported on 'Finger-prints of Crime':

> When the hand touches anything, it leaves upon the object touched a representation of that part which came in contact with the object. This impress is not visible to the eye […] As the markings of the hand are quite distinct in each individual; these pictures may prove useful in bringing crime home to the perpetrator. (p.7)

Similarly, the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (1902) reported:

> If, then, in using the finger-print as a means of identification, two such prints are compared and found to be identical, no doubt can be entertained 'that they are prints of the same finger of the same person […] The prints of one finger, if clearly taken, are, therefore, enough to decide the question of identity or non-identity, and if the prints of three or more fingers be taken and compared, all possibility of error is absolutely eliminated. (p. 9).

Many of the early famous cases of fingerprinting that were reported from around the world revolved around crimes in urban areas and showcased the possibility for solving similar crimes and identifying perpetrators. For example, famous cases such as that of Henry Jackson (whose fingerprints were recorded on a windowsill during the investigation of a burglary in Denmark Hill, London, in June 1902) and of Henri-Léon Scheffer (whose fingerprints were recorded on a plane of glass during the investigation of a murder in Paris, in October 1902) were widely reported within the Australian press. As these examples suggest, fingerprinting was also of principal investigative value for the *types* of crime that prevailed in the urban areas of Sydney.

The NSW Police 'Finger-print Branch'

In this environment of growing excitement around fingerprinting, in 1901, Sam McCauley, Deputy Controller of Prisons and Inspector of Prisons in New South Wales, travelled to New Scotland Yard to study the use and classification of fingerprints (Australian Police, 2021a). Following his return to Sydney in 1902, prison authorities at Darlinghurst Gaol began to collect and record fingerprints utilising the Henry Classification Method (often referred to as the Henry Fingerprinting System (Dodds, 1986)). In October 1902, *The Daily Telegraph* noted that fingerprinting "will prove of great value in the tracing of criminals and the deterrence of crime" (p. 7). Clearly then, a key element in the early introduction of fingerprinting, and the initial focus of the system on the gaol population, was to develop a registry of offenders, tie the identity of those offenders to their fingerprints, and ensure that individuals could be identified with certainty should they re-offend. As discussed earlier, this came in a broader climate of concern around the 'habitual criminal', and fingerprinting was hailed as the definitive solution to those concerns. The emphasis on 'crime-suppression' reinforced the hope at the time that, once knowledge of fingerprinting was known to the public, those habitual criminals would be less likely to attempt to reoffend, particularly within the ever-sprawling metropolis of Sydney.

McCauley and the Darlinghurst Gaol fingerprint bureau were instrumental in training one of NSW police's greatest champions of the fingerprinting system: Senior Sergeant Walter Henry Childs. In June 1903, the collection of approximately 600 sets of prints from Darlinghurst Gaol were given to the NSW Police Department to begin a 'Finger Print Bureau', initially as part of the Detective Branch and later as a separate Finger-print Branch, under the control of Senior Sergeant Childs (Dodds, 1986; NSW Police Department, 1904). *The Sydney Morning Herald* (1903) reported that, "This is an important decision, as it will in time revolutionise the old methods of tracing criminals and wrong-doers" (p. 7), while the NSW Police Report for 1903 noted that:

> By means of the system the identity of a criminal who has previously had his 'prints' taken can be absolutely established by forwarding the impressions to the bureau, whereas previously it has in many instances been necessary to despatch an officer at considerable expense to identify arrested persons. (NSW Police Department, 1904, p. 4)

Again, the emphasis here was on the *identification* of previous offenders (*The Sydney Morning Herald* went on to remark that fingerprinting would not necessarily supersede photography as the best way to identify criminals); nonetheless, the added ability to link fingerprints to crime scenes also appealed to police. With that in mind, throughout the Finger-print Branch's first year of use, only 100 of the 'principal' stations were supplied with the "necessary appliances for taking imprints" (NSW Police Department, 1904, p. 4), and plans were made for additional stations to be supplied with the equipment when it became available (The Sydney Morning Herald, 1903). Unfortunately, there is no further detail on where these

'principal stations' were located, but it is safe to assume that most were located within Sydney where the perceived need (in terms of perceived rates of recidivism and the need to *identify* repeat offenders) and resources were focused.

The initial successes of fingerprinting surprised the NSW Police Force. The NSW Police Report for 1904 remarked that fingerprinting "has proved a much greater success than was ever anticipated […] During the year 616 sets of prints were received […] and of these 209 were identified" (NSW Police Department, 1905, p. 5). In particular, even at this early stage, metropolitan police recognised the state-wide (even nation-wide and international) benefits that fingerprinting could provide for policing. Thus, the report remarked that the 209 people identified included "5 for New Zealand, 2 for Queensland, and 1 for South Australia", and the report suggested that "The identity of a New South Wales' criminal arrested, say, at Perth, Western Australia, can now be established beyond all doubt" (NSW Police Department, 1905, p. 5). In one particular case noted in the report, an individual was identified to be already serving a sentence "of two years in a country gaol" (NSW Police Department, 1905, p. 5). The report thus raised early prospects of enhancing the use of the system in rural areas of the state. The 1904 report elaborated that:

> In many instances where persons had been committed for trial for various offences they were quite unknown to the local police; upon receipt of their prints at the Finger Print Branch it was immediately discovered that they were old criminals, and the country police were thereupon supplied their photographs and criminal histories. (NSW Police Department, 1905, p. 5)

Elsewhere, fingerprinting was quickly being adopted by other state police forces. In Victoria, for example, Robert Haldane (1995) notes that in 1904, Detective Lionel Frank Potter led the state's efforts and began "to compile a fingerprint collection at the Russel Street Detective Office" (p. 131). In NSW, while the efforts of the Finger-print Branch were focused on metropolitan Sydney, the Inspector-General of Police was clearly mindful at this early stage that criminals were increasingly mobile, and that 'country areas' would need to be included within the system.

Early successes in utilising fingerprinting outside of the Sydney metropolis reinforced these ideas. In 1904, a case featured in both the 1904 annual police report and throughout the press. The *Sunday Times* (1904) reported:

> A man was sent to New Zealand yesterday under charge of an officer from that colony as a result of the finger-print photograph system ... The man was arrested under the name of John Pinero five or six weeks ago at Goulburn … His finger-prints were taken and forwarded to the Sydney authorities, who had no record of him. But a photograph of his finger-prints was sent to the various police headquarters in Australasia. As a result, the New Zealand police recognised him as Otto Heerdigan, alias JC Adams, who, in November last, escaped from Dunedin Gaol while undergoing eight sentences aggregating 2 and a half years for theft. (p. 5)

The case highlighted the value of both international cooperation, and of cooperation between 'Sydney authorities' and police outside the Sydney metropolitan area. Police awareness of the importance of those relationships continued to grow with each passing year. By 1905, the number of identifications had increased from 209 to 451, and the number of inter-state and international records and identifications rose rapidly.[2] The Inspector-General expressed great satisfaction in the system's ability to identify individuals who gave false names, but, with the system still in its infancy, the focus of discussion was already beginning to shift to the value of fingerprinting as a forensic tool. The 1905 report noted that a case where fingerprints were found on a small pane of glass "affords the best example of the value of the system to the police, and is at the same time an instance of absolutely the highest use to which it is possible to apply this method of identification" (NSW Police Department, 1906, p. 4).

Even though the theory and practice of the fingerprinting system focused on metropolitan crime and criminals, the rural press repeated the excitement of their metropolitan counterparts. In particular, the rural press emphasised the success of the system in rural areas and helped highlight how the system could be used to solve rural crimes and identify suspects in rural areas. For example, in 1906 the *Evening News* reported a case from Hay where an offender (in default of paying a fine) denied he had been convicted before, but was subsequently 'caught out' when his fingerprints matched those on police records, revealing that he "had served two sentences of three years each for horse-stealing and burglary" (p. 5). This case highlights how rural offenders were being fingerprinted, even at this early stage, for relatively minor offences. In another example, *The Bega Budget* reported on a case in 1907 where "an offender incarcerated in Bega gaol had his fingerprints taken and forward to Sub-Inspector Child's […] the prints were found to be identical with those of a notorious character who has 29 convictions recorded against him and glories in a number of aliases" (p. 6). In the same report, *The Bega Budget* (1907) provided details on a burglary that took place in Candelo (a small rural town in the far south-east corner of NSW with a reported population of 643 in 1911 (ABS, 1911)). On investigating the scene, police found fingerprints on pieces of broken glass which, upon examination by the Finger-print Branch, matched those recently recorded from a man in Sydney (The Bega Budget, 1907). While such rural successes were relatively rare in these early years, they nonetheless encouraged police fingerprinting activities, and, via their reporting in the press, may have helped served as a deterrence to rural crime.

In another case, *The Daily Telegraph* recounted a court case in Narrabri where the police brought two men before the court for the same offence. Both men, "who, in general appearance, could hardly be told apart", were only differentiated by their fingerprints (The Daily Telegraph, 1909, p. 7). The article explained that "one was a complete stranger in the

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[2] During 1905, 50 prints were received at the Finger Print Branch from other states of Australia, plus an additional 23 from New Zealand and 9 from South Africa. Of those non-NSW prints, 24 resulted in identifications (NSW Police Department, 1906, p. 3). By 1908, the number of prints received from outside NSW had increased to 243 (NSW Police Department, 1909, p. 5).

town, and the other well known locally", which linked back to fear surrounding movement between areas and 'unknown', 'habitual', offender (The Daily Telegraph, 1909, p. 7). While the article was unclear on whether the person convicted was the local man or not, it nonetheless highlighted how fingerprinting was being used to address the same issues and concerns in rural areas, as in metropolitan Sydney.

By 1908 the police had started to use fingerprints to identify deceased persons. During 1908 alone the police identified three corpses through fingerprints – two in metropolitan Sydney, and one in regional Singleton. Media outlets referred to the identification of the three corpses throughout 1908 as "a finger-print triumph" and "one of the most striking successes in connection with the finger-print system" (The Daily Telegraph, 18 Feb 1908, p. 6). In regards to the case in Singleton, the deceased's body was found near the Singleton Railway Station. The man's body had been "knocked down by a train and several more trains had passed over him" leaving his features "unrecognisable" (Evening News, 1908, p. 4). After the success of identifying other bodies in Sydney that year, the Inspector-General of police, Mr Garvin, wired the Singleton police and requested that they take fingerprints and send them to Sydney. As a result, the body was successfully identified. This case again highlights the attention that metropolitan police were taking in rural cases, and how they were actively looking for ways in which fingerprinting could be used throughout the state. However, it also highlights that at that time, while fingerprinting was celebrated for its policing benefits, the local police in Singleton had not considered the use of fingerprints *for this purpose*, and, even when the idea was suggested, the local prints had to be sent to Sydney for analysis.

Development and Training

A key international criticism of anthropometry was that officers were often poorly trained in the technique, resulting in variations in measurements/records which subsequently undermined the viability of (and perceived public and judicial faith in) the system. Conversely, throughout the 1890s and 1900s, fingerprinting was hailed as a superior method largely because it was easier to learn and produced consistent results. To avoid the problems that anthropometry had experienced, and to defend the value of the new fingerprinting system (and its science) in courts, the successful implementation of fingerprinting in NSW hinged on the recognition that officers required sufficient training to deliver a 'foolproof' system. Thus, throughout the latter part of 1903, Senior-Sergeant Childs arranged lessons at metropolitan police stations (The Sydney Morning Herald, 1903) and a "class of instruction" was formed for "recruits passing through the depot" (NSW Police Department, 1904, p. 4). While the training of officers in fingerprint identification and comparison methods originated in metropolitan NSW, it was quickly recognised that police in rural areas would also benefit from access to fingerprint analysis. The 1906 NSW Police Report noted that "a number of police throughout the State have been instructed as to the proper method of taking prints, &c., and all recruits passing through the Depot receive similar instruction" (NSW Police Department, 1907, p. 4). Later, in 1911, the Inspector-General of NSW Police remarked:

I might state that every candidate appointed to the Police Force is given instructions as to the methods of taking finger-prints, and the various ways in which they may assist the Police are thoroughly explained to him. (NSW Police Department, 1912, p. 8)

There seemed to be little concern about the ease of training police officers in fingerprint collection. Indeed, on 10 February, 1907, *Sunday Times* published a celebratory report that hailed the early success of fingerprinting, and, in a reflection of the city-country divide, reported that this method was so easy that even "the most dull-witted police officer in the country could not make a mistake in the simple operation of inking a slab, placing the fingers upon it, and impressing them on the record-sheet, which is forwarded to the authorities in Sydney, who file it in its proper division" (p. 1). Despite this, Edmonds (2019) reports that fingerprint training became more formalised in the 1920s and 1930s, possibly because the system was becoming so large and there were expanding possibilities for the collection of fingerprints from crime scenes.

While many rural police were trained in how to obtain fingerprints, access to broader fingerprinting records (in order to check the recorded prints across the records on file and thus achieve a positive identification) remained a key barrier. Rural police who wanted to use the fingerprinting system were forced to take fingerprint exhibits to metropolitan areas for analysis, and, at times, Finger-print Officials from Sydney visited areas outside Sydney to examine prints on record (NSW Police Department, 1907, p. 4). Because of the logistical costs involved in both of these activities, they were, with some exceptions, initially only used in cases of 'serious crime'. Rural police effectively had to weigh up the costs of having their records checked against the potential benefit. The net effect was that, while metropolitan stations could take advantage of the close proximity of the Finger-print Branch and their records and expertise, rural stations could not (all the more so with increased geographical distance from Sydney), and thus, it is likely that fingerprints retrieved from less serious cases in rural areas were less frequently used.

Each year, the Inspector-General of Police reported on the total number of sets of fingerprints received by the Finger-print Branch, the number of identifications based on those prints, the number of 'examinations of articles brought to the Finger-print Branch' for analysis, and the number of 'visits made by members of the Finger-print Staff to places in the city, suburbs and country for the purposes of searching for finger-prints in connection with crimes committed' (See for example NSW Police Department, 1931, p. 3). While this provides us with a valuable picture of the increase in policing activity around fingerprinting, the latter two pieces of data ('examinations of articles' and 'visits made') are of particular pertinence for understanding the development of fingerprinting in rural areas of NSW (see Table 2 for a summary of these figures between 1904 and 1930). While this data is not exclusively 'rural', and may even include outer suburbs of Sydney, it gives a general indication of the increasing activity around fingerprinting within the state over the course of this era. For example, in 1906, the first year that data on articles and visits was reported, 86 exhibits from across the state were taken to various Finger-print Officials in Sydney for

examination (NSW Police Department, 1907). Finger-print officials also made 32 visits to the 'City, Suburbs, and Country' to examine prints on record. By 1930 this had increased to 852 exhibits being taken from across the state to the Finger-print Branch, with 1,235 visits being made to stations across the state (NSW Police Department, 1931). The data on these exhibits and the visits made by Finger-print Officials shows that, as fingerprinting training and equipment became more widespread in the state throughout the 1900s and 1910s, rural officers increasingly took up the opportunity to bring their exhibits to Sydney, and Finger-print Officials continued to visit rural areas to examine their prints on record.

The 'articles' arriving at the branch for identification were various forms of fingerprint evidence taken directly from serious crime scenes. If the perpetrator resided in a rural area, it was less likely they would have had their fingerprints on record (this likelihood increases over the course of the century as fingerprinting systems improve in rural areas). We do not have precise information on rates of identification from these *articles* or *visits*, but a note in the 1907 Annual Report suggests that, of the articles brought in from country areas for analysis, "in the majority of cases no prints were found" (NSW Police Department, 1908, p. 5). The failure to find prints on articles may suggest that, at least in 1907, when fingerprinting in NSW was still in its infancy (and despite the well-advertised 'ease' of training in fingerprinting methods), rural police struggled to apply correct fingerprinting methods to retrieve a print that was suitable for analysis.

However, despite the reportedly low rate of success in finding prints on articles brought into the branch, the NSW Police nonetheless celebrated their early successes where they occurred. As early as 1904, the NSW police were already praising the benefits of having a state-wide fingerprint branch where local police could send impressions to check if they had arrested a habitual offender. The sharing of fingerprint cards between stations, and even across states within Australia, was believed to be a "money saver" for the government because local police were no longer required to travel to potentially identify a person of interest (Evening News, 1909, p. 8). Thus, at a glance, the relatively low rate of success reported on these articles suggests that, while the system was of limited benefit for rural stations during the early years of implementation, officers nonetheless believed there would be long-term benefits once the system was further developed, officers were trained, and the number of records had increased. Furthermore, as explored in more detail below, on average rural officers in this early era typically had less training and fewer resources to support successful retrieval of a print from a scene, which increased the likelihood of their retrieving a print unsuitable for identification during the early years of fingerprinting.

Despite that low rate of success in finding prints on rurally-sourced articles, other data, celebrated by Inspector-Generals in their Annual Reports, suggested that fingerprinting was revealing the highly mobile nature of habitual criminals. As noted earlier, Annual Reports from the NSW Police highlighted how fingerprint records were being shared with interstate and international authorities, and the reports (in addition to press reports of the era) also highlight particular cases where those records had successfully identified repeat offenders. We also have accurate data on the numbers and *rates* of identification from those

interstate records, and it presents a more nuanced picture of the situation. In total, from 1904 to 1921 (when data on interstate prints were reported), identifications resulted from 2,142 of the 5,363 interstate records analysed by the Finger-print Branch – an identification rate of 39.9%.

Table 2

NSW Police Finger-print Branch 'examinations of articles' and 'visits made'

Year	Identifications	Examinations of articles	Visits made	No. of inter-state prints received	Identifications from inter-state prints received
1904	209				8
1905	451			81	24
1906	491	86	32	91	22
1907	568	254	85	116	37
1908	862	310	185	243	83
1909	1065	232	193	298	126
1910	1156	220	173	283	106
1911	1164	182	207	395	144
1912	1411	234	230	350	147
1913	1801	400	228	312	106
1914	2162	445	221	344	121
1915	2213	450	130	293	100
1916	2015	442	149	210	69
1917	1870	332	138	252	113
1918	1740	262	130	255	117
1919	1953	438	231	452	192
1920	2431	746		545	248
1921	3013	785	300	341	216
1922	3022	763	327		
1923	3275	765	248		
1924	3584	968	431		
1925	3824	574	264		
1926	3895	593	257		
1927	3728	593	327		
1928	4659	639	579		
1929	5218	770	952		
1930	5960	852	1235		

Sources: NSW Police Department Annual Reports 1904-1930.

The relatively high rates of success in securing identification from interstate records reflects the likelihood that the records sent interstate were those of perceived 'habitual criminals' – or, in other words, those *known* individuals deemed mobile and likely reoffenders. NSW Police Annual Reports specifically mention how the records of particular individuals were distributed between states (and other nations such as New Zealand, South Africa, Great Britain and the USA) because of concerns police had about the individuals. It is likely then that early interactions between the Finger-print Branch and rural police stations followed a similar pattern, with the records of known and perceived mobile and likely to reoffend individuals being the subject of attention.

While the regional press (largely echoing their metropolitan counterparts) reported enthusiastically on the exciting possibilities of fingerprinting, the practical realities of rural resourcing, technological limitations, and criminal behaviour limited the successes seen elsewhere in Sydney and other metropolitan areas. The key barrier to the successful early uptake of fingerprinting in rural NSW was not so much the will or desire of the NSW Police Force, but other broader practical issues of resourcing and technology.

Resources and Technology

Throughout the 1890s, 1900s and 1910s, the adoption of new technologies in the NSW Police Force improved police procedures and effectiveness. Trains assisted with increased mobility, and in metropolitan Sydney telephones were used to concentrate police personnel where required (NSW Police Department, 1891, p. 2). The advantages of these technologies were more limited in rural areas, despite efforts to bridge the urban-rural divide where feasible:

> In March, 1862, there were but 36 Electric Telegraph Stations in the Colony, and only 1,616 miles of wire in operation; now there are 87 stations and 5,517 miles of wire, and an immediate prospect of the most remote Districts, such as Bourke, being brought into communication with the Metropolis. The advantage thus accruing to the Police can hardly be over-estimated. We are thereby enabled to receive and instantly circulate reports of crime and descriptions of offenders, besides facilitating the operations of the Police, and preventing much unnecessary travelling. (NSW Police Department, 1872, p. 3)

In 1893 police in Sydney and some country areas began to use bicycles, however there appeared to be some scepticism of its use with comments that "Under no circumstances, however, can bicycles replace horses to any considerable extent in the performance of police duties during the year" (NSW Police Department, 1897, p. 3). As explored in more detail below, limited access to such resources and technologies was a critical barrier to the successful uptake of fingerprinting in rural areas.

In the years immediately following the introduction of fingerprinting in NSW, the Inspector-General of Police regularly intimated that the resources of the Finger-print Branch

in Sydney were adequate to deal with the volume of work required. The 1906 Annual Report noted that, with 491 identifications throughout the year, "Nearly the whole of the work connected with this Branch has been done by the officers concerned in their spare time, and without additional cost to the Department" (NSW Police Department, 1907, p. 4). In 1907, with identifications up to 568, the Annual Report announced a small increase in staff within the Finger-print Branch:

> Owing to the increase of work in connection with the system, I have increased the staff by one constable, but it might be pointed out that each officer concerned in the finger-print matters attends to other clerical work as well, and the staff at present constituted is only one in excess of what it was prior to 1903, in which year Henry's System was adopted." (NSW Police Department, 1908, p. 5).

The following year, the Inspector-General reported in the 1908 Annual Report that, with identifications up to 862, "the officers carrying out this important duty are not exclusively employed upon it, as each one has clerical and other work to attend to as well" (NSW Police Department, 1909, p. 6). The key issue was not so much that the branch could not cope with the volume of work, rather, that the volume of work was limited by broader resourcing and technological issues, which were particularly pronounced in rural areas. Indeed, despite the early success of fingerprinting in Sydney, and the praise given to the new system by the Inspector-General of Police in NSW, rural areas faced ongoing struggles with access to adequate training, resources and technologies to support their use of the fingerprinting system.

The 1910s, for example, saw further expansion of the telephone service throughout the state, including the development of lines in Sydney, but, again due to geographical restrictions and associated costs, rural stations were often low on the priority list. Indeed, it was not until 1928 that all Police Stations in NSW were connected by telephone (Australian Police, 2022). In 1924, wireless telegraphy was introduced to stations, and in 1937 the police radio telephone system was established. Throughout this era, the ability for rural stations to request fingerprint comparison or assistance was limited and time-consuming, and they largely relied instead on physical modes of transportation to exchange information (such as articles).

Similarly, limitations on the availability of transportation for police also hampered the viability of fingerprinting in this time period. For example, the NSW Police only acquired their first motor vehicle in 1912, and that vehicle could only be used by the Inspector-General (NSW Government, n.d.). The first police patrol car was brought into NSW in 1915, and early vehicles were mainly limited to metropolitan areas. The NSW Police would have to wait until 1941 before a dedicated motor vehicle and two panel vans were made available for the purpose of transporting fingerprint experts to scenes of crime, and again, this was principally for use in Sydney (Australian Police 2021b). This limitation affected the police's ability to respond to crime scenes in both metropolitan and rural areas, and undermined the broader viability of fingerprinting, particularly if fingerprint evidence was left exposed to the

elements. Instead of motor vehicles, police in this era often relied on horses (in 1903 the 23 officers of the Detective Branch reported had two mounted police and one horse available to them) and bicycles as a more rapid mode of transportation, when needed.

Successful identification of an individual via fingerprint was a manual task, and for the initial period at least, only a select few police were trained in comparing fingerprints. Throughout the 1900s, much of the reporting suggested that Childs took the lead in examining fingerprint evidence and making positive identifications, and Childs (often with another officer from the Bureau to corroborate) was frequently before metropolitan courts explaining the system and their means of securing an identification from the evidence (see for example The Daily Telegraph, 1909, p. 10). As the number of prints grew, authorities began to consider ways to streamline the system and their manner of record-keeping. According to Dodds (1986), automating the fingerprint collections was only conceived in the mid-1930s because manual searches were becoming too cumbersome with the ever-growing collection. The police first tried a punch card system, but this did not make the task any simpler, and it was not until 1985 that tenders for an automated computer processing system were evaluated (Dodds, 1986).

Conclusion

Fingerprinting was initially adopted around the world as a forensic identification tool to identify habitual criminals. Due to its versatility to identify repeat offenders, link suspects to a crime scene, identify victims, and clear suspects, it was heralded as a 'triumph'. As police forces around the world adopted fingerprinting, the focus remained on using fingerprints in metropolitan areas. At times, the use of fingerprinting in rural or regional areas was highlighted by the media or within the annual police reports, but for the main part, the resources and focus were almost exclusively in metropolitan areas.

While our conclusions about how police were using fingerprinting in rural areas are limited by the availability of source material, this paper nonetheless provides the start of an explanation for this issue. The reality was that fingerprinting in NSW was focused on metropolitan Sydney, with limited support provided to rural areas. While the NSW police recognised the importance of fingerprinting in all areas of the state, resources were not spread equitably. Where possible, the NSW police tried to work around these limitations, for example, by training all recruits passing through the depot in fingerprint collection and comparison methods to ensure that, no matter where an officer was posted, that they had the ability to collect and compare prints. It was clear that there was a practice developed in this early era of encouraging rural and regional stations to send prints into Sydney for analysis, and in some rare cases rural places were directly contacted by Sydney to send specific prints.

Yet, this only occurred in the more serious cases as well (or the ones that would possibly be sensational in the media, such as the Singleton train victim). There were logistical costs involved in sending prints back to Sydney and in having 'experts' travel to regions to provide fingerprint advice. It is likely that the experts travelling to rural areas took copies of

the station's prints at that time and returned them to Sydney for analysis. The police reports do not provide information about how many stations were visited, nor how frequently particular stations were visited. It is likely, particularly in the earlier years, that many of the station visits were in more accessible and developing 'regional' locations outside of Sydney, such as Wollongong, Goulburn, and Newcastle. As time progressed, we see a clear increase in the prints being sent to Sydney and the number of times experts visited stations – and this reflects the growing mobility of the police force and growing resources, not just to fingerprints, but to broader police technologies.

Some rural cases were highlighted in the police annual reports and the media, but as a whole this was a very small proportion of cases, and usually related to more 'exceptional' cases that highlighted the usefulness of fingerprinting as an identification method. There was no reporting of how rural stations felt about fingerprints, and one media report went as far as to discredit the capabilities of rural police. As such, fingerprinting in NSW was largely a metropolitan phenomenon, with rural police stations receiving limited support and training. Not surprisingly, this meant that the majority of publicity and 'cases' focused on metropolitan fingerprinting 'successes'.

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