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1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Police reclaim city streets

BYLINE: BRIANNA TRAVERS, DAVID HURLEY and GENEVIEVE ALISON

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POLICE last night reclaimed the city's streets during the **Moomba** Festival, responding in a huge show of force to threats by youths to wreak havoc.

Hundreds of uniformed police officers, the public order response team, undercover cops, the mounted brigade and water police patrolled along the Yarra River, searching festival-goers and jumping on the first signs of trouble.

The most serious altercation occurred around 11pm at Federation Square when police deployed pepper spray and pulled out their batons after youths swarmed.

Two men were left wincing in pain, affected by the pepper spray. The incident appeared to start with an argument between two groups of young men. A second fracas occurred shortly after causing the mounted police to move in, with police trying to shift hundreds of people off the stairs at Federation Square.

Troublemakers were left in no doubt about who was in control last night after police were last year caught out when dozens of youths rioted.

Police officers were put on high alert after receiving intelligence that a group of 80-100 troublemakers was heading into the city by train.

The large group was allegedly planning to carry out a number of crimes including mobile phone thefts, snatch and grab offences, car-jackings, and assaults on members of the public and police officers, as well as brawling and affray-type offending.

The intelligence suggested gang members were looking to "cause as much havoc as possible" in the city between 1am and 2am.

Police also received information that a brawl between two rival groups was scheduled for Federation Square at midnight.

Dozens of people were searched for weapons throughout the night as police used their stop and search powers. The State Government had earlier designated the CBD and **Moomba** locations as subject to these powers.

At least 12 people had been arrested by press time, including one for carrying a weapon, four for behavioural issues and two for carrying alcohol.

Throughout the night, the Sunday Herald Sun saw dozens of people being searched by police, and one youth, who spat and swore at police, being arrested.

A balaclava was found in the bag of one youth in a group of young men who were searched after a tip-off from event security that the teenagers may have been selling counterfeit ride tickets.

When asked by the Sunday Herald Sun why he was carrying the mask, the young man said it was "to take photos in" and then post online. Police told him to throw it away immediately.

More than 100 officers monitored the crowds on the banks of the Yarra River and throughout Alexandra Gardens during the fireworks. Another dozen officers were at the festival's skate park, where teenagers were congregating.

Two males were arrested and third pinned down outside Hungry Jack's on Swanston St. The man, who was pinned down repeatedly, swore and yelled at police "f- youse all".

Robert, who works in the area, witnessed the incident unfold. "The male queried the police and then he started to mouth off at the coppers and started swinging his arms at the police," Robert said.

Another witness said the male was "out-of-order" because he "randomly started abusing police". The man was released soon after.

Thousands of cheerful Melburnians had earlier flocked to the banks of the Yarra for the first day of the family festival. Families said they were not hesitant to come back this year, despite last year's violence.

"I'm glad there's more police around. We weren't hesitant, it makes us feel a bit more safe. There is a lot of police on the ground," one man said.brianna.travers@news.com.au

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