

Police shoot dead mentally ill man in Melbourne, Australia

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Police in Melbourne shot and killed a 53-year-old mentally ill man on May 28. The incident occurred around 10 a.m. in the emergency lane of one of the city's major arterial motorways, in full view of passing traffic.

Police later explained that they had received a call that there was a “distressed male” parked in the emergency lane of the Monash Freeway. Four officers arrived soon after and confronted the man, who was holding a knife. Dash cam footage from a passing motorist showed the police standing behind their vehicles with their guns drawn, a few metres away from the man who was standing behind his car's driver door.

Assistant Police Commissioner Bob Hill insisted, “We [the officers] tried to negotiate with him, we actually tried to calm him down.” He described the event as a “mental health episode, and a sad occasion.”

According to the police account, the man began to move towards the police. Officers attempted to withdraw, according to Hill, “but the man continued to advance.” Police fired a “non-lethal” beanbag round, and after that one officer fired at least two shots from a semi-automatic weapon. The rounds hit the man's chest, killing him.

Much about the incident remains unclear, including why other non-lethal tactics were not used, such as capsicum spray. The officers were reportedly wearing body cameras, but the footage has not been released. Homicide detectives are reviewing what happened, overseen by the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC).

Little information has been released about the deceased man, other than his age, residence in the outer working class suburb of Narre Warren, and that he had no criminal record.

His death marks another incident where police have killed someone suffering a mental health crisis.

In 2013 the Australian Institute of Criminology released a report on fatal police shootings between 1989 and 2011.

Over that period, 105 people were shot dead by the police. Some 42 percent of these victims had a mental illness at their time of death. From 1998 to 2018, 35 people in the state of New South Wales were shot dead by police. Of these, 54 percent had a mental illness.

There have been multiple instances of mentally ill people holding knives being fatally shot by police. Some of the examples include:

- In 2008, 15-year-old Tyler Cassidy was shot dead by the police in a Melbourne skate park, mown down by 5 bullets from three police officers. Tyler was armed with two knives, and at the time of his death was suffering from profound mental and emotional anguish (see: “Police gun down 15-year-old boy”).

- In 2015, 22-year-old Courtney Topic was shot dead within 41 seconds when police arrived and observed her holding a kitchen knife. She was suffering from a severe episode of psychosis. Witnesses said that she was not posing a threat to anyone (see: “Australian police killed mentally ill young woman seconds after arriving at scene”).

- In 2017, 30-year-old Danukul Mokmool, armed with a pair of scissors, was shot dead by police in the centre of Sydney. According to an eyewitness, “he did not need to die.” Mokmool was suffering from paranoid hallucinations at the time of his death (see: “Australian police kill mentally-ill man at Sydney's main train station”).

- In August 2019, Todd McKenzie, a 40-year-old man diagnosed with schizophrenia, was fatally shot by police inside his home in Taree, on the Mid North Coast of

NSW, after a neighbour reported seeing him on his veranda holding a knife (see: “Mentally-ill man shot dead by police at his home”).

- In September 2019, Joyce Clarke, a 29-year-old Aboriginal woman in Geraldton, Western Australia, was killed after police were called to her house following reports that she had been brandishing a knife (see: “Mass protests after police shoot and kill Aboriginal teenager in remote Australian town”).

Only in the case of Joyce Clarke’s death have any charges against the police officers involved been laid.

Routinely, when these fatal shootings occur, they are investigated by the Professional Standards Command, an agency of the police force itself. A coronial inquest is then held in which the coroner inevitably recommends that the police should receive more training in dealing with vulnerable young and or mentally ill people, and should be accompanied by trained mental health professionals. The purpose of such inquiries is to create the illusion that the capitalist state is responding to public outrage, while nothing changes and the police violence continues unabated.

Due to decades of austerity measures by Labor and Liberal governments alike, proper mental health services and facilities have been gutted. As a consequence, police are becoming the primary response for mental health call-outs, instead of trained mental health professionals.

The latest police killing in Australia occurs in the context of an escalating international movement of working people and youth, outraged by the brutal police murder of George Floyd in the United States. It points to the class issues involved in the political struggle against state repression, with working people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds at risk of being threatened with police violence.



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