

# 16-year-old Australian Aboriginal dies in maximum security adult prison

Jason Wardle  
29 October 2023

A 16-year-old Aboriginal youth, Cleveland Dodd, died on October 19 in Western Australia, after allegedly suffering fatal self-harm a week earlier while detained in Perth's adult maximum-security Casuarina Prison.

The state Labor government bears criminal responsibility for the appalling incident. Last year at Banksia Hill, the state's only youth detention centre, child detainees and guards clashed. Although no-one was harmed, then Labor Premier Mark McGowan called the incident an act of "terrorism." In a clear act of state retribution, dozens of detainees were moved into a wing of Casuarina Prison, known as Unit 18. There Cleveland Dodd and his fellow inmates were recently permitted an average of less than two hours a day outside of their cells.

Dodd's apparent suicide followed at least 20 suicide attempts and more than 350 instances of self-harm in Unit 18. His death was entirely foreseeable and preventable.

Open letters signed by over 100 organisations were sent to premiers and ministers over the past year calling for Unit 18 to be shut down. In July, the Supreme Court of Western Australia ruled that the use of prolonged solitary confinement at both Unit 18 and Banksia Hill was unlawful and had "the capacity to cause immeasurable and lasting damage to an already psychologically vulnerable group."

Despite this, the situation continued unabated. The *Australian* reported that prison psychologists were told there was "basically no point" in trying to make appointment times with detainees, as there was "no space" for counselling. Detainees were also told if they did attend appointments, they would count as their limited out-of-cell time for that day.

Dodd's situation was specifically raised in an urgent

letter sent by lawyers with the Aboriginal Legal Services (ALS) to the Deputy Corrective Services Commissioner responsible for youth detention, just two weeks before the alleged fatal self-harm episode. The youth had told his lawyers that he spent most days sleeping, as he had only been allowed out of his cell "generally one hour a day" and sometimes not at all.

ALS Director of Legal Services Peter Collins said the letter indicated that they were "deeply concerned about his mental health deteriorating as a consequence of him remaining at Unit 18" but they received no substantive response.

The Labor government's callous indifference to the plight of incarcerated youth was further displayed immediately after Dodd's alleged self-harm incident on October 12. That day, while Dodd was being treated in hospital for injuries he succumbed to a week later, Premier Roger Cook described Unit 18 as a "necessary evil" that had to be maintained until "new infrastructure" could be developed.

Indigenous suicide prevention advocate Megan Krakouer, who was with the boy's family when he passed away, denounced Cook as "disgraceful," adding: "It is a disgusting comment, and he should be ashamed of himself. We're talking about a 16-year-old boy."

Cleveland Dodd was reportedly on remand since May, awaiting charges for aggravated burglary and theft. Cleveland grew up in the small town of Laverton, in the goldfields region of central Western Australia. It seems he struggled with an intellectual disability and had a troubled family life. His 33-year-old father is in prison. His grandmother, who raised him, has stated that all five of her children and most of her forty grandchildren had attended Banksia Hill.

Dodd's mother, Nadene, had not even been informed

that he had been moved to Unit 18, which occurred three months earlier, learning this only when receiving the call that he had been hospitalised. She has insisted her son had no prior history of self-harm. His mother explained that Dodd, “Loved a lot of things. Loved school, basketball and going to the drop-in centre.” Speaking with ABC News, she added: “They just failed his duty of care” and “never helped him when he needed help.”

Last Thursday, several hundred people rallied in central Perth to demand “Justice for Cleveland” and the immediate closure of Unit 18.

Cleveland’s grandmother, Glenda Mippy, addressed the rally, saying her grandson’s life had been stolen. “They call it justice, but he got taken out on a stretcher,” she said. “My grandson is lying in a morgue and why? Because they f\*\*ked up.” His paternal grandmother, Daryna Zadvirna, one of a hundred family members who travelled to the city to give support to one another and grieve over the loss of Cleveland, explained that she would not be leaving Perth until she had answers.

The Labor government has responded to public outrage over the latest Aboriginal death in custody with a damage control operation. It has replaced Corrective Services Commissioner Mike Reynolds. The Unit 18 prison officer who was on duty but allegedly sleeping when Dodd self-harmed has been suspended, pending an internal investigation. The Crimes and Corruption Commission has initiated an inquiry amidst allegations of misconduct. A coronial inquest is also planned.

None of these initiatives will do anything to resolve the oppression of Aboriginal youth.

Australia’s ongoing treatment of young people in custody has long been horrific and widely condemned by advocacy groups and human rights organisations. Today Aboriginal people account for about three percent of the broader population but make up close to thirty percent of inmates.

The rate of incarceration for Aboriginal youth in Australia stands at 152 per ten thousand, twenty times higher than for others. In Western Australia, the figure is even greater, at 278 per ten thousand, compared to 9 for others. In 2021, thirty countries of the United Nations Human Rights Commission came together to condemn the human rights abuses Australia perpetrates against children in custody.

In February this year the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) cancelled its inspection visit to Australia after authorities failed to keep to earlier commitments, denying access to key facilities in multiple states. The only other country to do so was Rwanda.

Incarceration rates of Aboriginal people have doubled following the 1987–1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which amounted to a whitewash of police misconduct. At least 23 of 99 cases investigated were claimed to have been “self inflicted hangings” and more were simply the result of “previously sustained head injuries.” Since then, of the 516 Indigenous people who have died in custody, 335 were in prison, 177 were in police custody and four were in youth detention.

Underlying this traumatic situation is the dire poverty and brutal social conditions afflicting many Aboriginal communities. Unemployment levels stood at over 50 percent at the time of the 2021 census, while Aboriginal men and woman have a life expectancy some eight years less than other Australians. Educational access is also limited by staff shortages and lack of infrastructure in rural and regional areas. In 2023, only 38 percent of Aboriginal people completed high school, compare to the national average of 80 percent.

The social and economic crisis afflicting Aboriginal workers and youth is a damning indictment of the capitalist system and all its political representatives.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**