

Australian police shoot another vulnerable person

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The New South Wales police shot an apparently mentally ill 48-year-old woman multiple times in western Sydney on December 21. The victim, Susie Bandera, is demanding compensation and an apology after being taken to hospital in a critical condition.

While all the details of the incident are not yet clear, two other witnesses have also condemned the shooting, saying it was totally unnecessary.

Bandera, a mother of two, has a bullet wound to the chest and another police bullet that lodged in her spine after it pierced her liver. Doctors have told her it may be too dangerous to remove the bullet from her spine. "My right leg is gone, I can't feel it," she told the *Sun-Herald* last weekend. "How [the bullet] missed my vital organs, I don't know."

Police claimed in a media statement that Bandera had threatened officers with a knife—an account denied by Bandera and other witnesses. "When I saw the police I ran towards them for help, to help me," Bandera said. "And as I ran towards them she [a female police officer] shot me, point blank."

The incident is the second such shooting of a visibly distressed person this month, after Victorian police killed 15-year-old Tyler Cassidy after firing at least six bullets at him in a skate park in a northern Melbourne suburb on December 11.

Bandera could have been easily subdued by the officers on hand, according to a person involved in the Sydney incident, Sonny Michael Angelo. Angelo told Channel Nine that Bandera was holding a fork, not a

knife, when she was shot in the hallway of a unit block in the working class suburb of North Parramatta.

"It was not necessary. There were ten police officers outside. Why would the police shoot at the old lady?" Angelo asked. A 23-year-old professional kickboxer, he said he had called police after the woman, whom he did not know, hit him on the back of the head while he was making an overseas call in a public telephone booth during the early hours of the morning.

Angelo said he subsequently subdued Bandera by pinning her down before the police got there. Upon arrival, the police ordered him to release Bandera before dousing them both in capsicum spray.

"The lady was trying to stand up and run away and that's when I heard a shot. They shot her two times," he said. "I said (to the police): 'What's wrong with you? Why you do that for? You know there is no problem (with) her anymore. I had her on the ground'."

People living in the unit substantiated Angelo's claim that no knife was used, telling the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the victim lived nearby and was known to always carry a fork. Angelo and Bandera had been arguing down the street from the units a half hour before the police arrived.

Anne McCabe, a 73-year-old retired health worker, was put in danger by the police because two bullets ricocheted, or were fired, into her flat. McCabe said she saw no knife on the victim: "We don't understand why the police are saying she was the attacker and that she had a knife."

The NSW Police said a police Critical Incident Team would investigate the incident. This means there will be no independent inquiry—the police will simply investigate themselves. Moreover, without waiting for the outcome of the investigation, acting assistant police commissioner Karen Webb has already defended the actions of the officers who fired the shots.

"Upon arrival the woman allegedly threatened police with a knife, refusing to surrender the weapons," Webb told the media. "Capsicum spray was used in an attempt to subdue her. The female continued in a threatening manner, lunging towards police and officers discharged a number of firearms."

As in the case of the recent Melbourne shooting, the media has used the incident to call for the arming of all officers with taser guns. Currently in NSW, two taser pistols have been provided to each of the state's 80 local area commands on a trial basis, but not all officers are permitted to use them. NSW Police Association secretary Peter Remfrey said: "We can't understand why there is any reluctance at the moment to issue a less than lethal option, being the taser, to officers who are already trained and equipped to use lethal force."

While portrayed as alternatives to lethal weapons, tasers, which electrocute and incapacitate victims, can kill or cause serious injury. Amnesty International has linked the use of taser guns by US police to 152 deaths from 2001 to 2006. Just over a year ago, in October and November 2007, four individuals died after being tasered in Canada. The most-publicised case was that of Robert Dziekanski, a non-English speaking man from Poland, who died in less than two minutes after being tasered by Royal Canadian Mounted Police at Vancouver airport on October 14, 2007.

The unwarranted shootings in Melbourne and Sydney only highlight the fact that further weapons should not be put in the hands of the police. NSW Police Minister Tony Kelly, however, quickly signalled a move to arm all frontline police officers with tasers by calling for a report on the current taser trial by the end of January, nine months early. "If someone is coming at you with a knife and the only alternative you have is a gun, then it [a taser] is a great idea," he told the *Daily Telegraph*.

According to media reports, the police believed the woman was mentally ill because there were 75 police records of incidents involving her in the past. Although all the circumstances are not yet clear, it is possible that the woman is another victim of the running down of mental health facilities and other social services.

Australian and New Zealand studies of prisoners have found that 25 to 50 percent have disorders such as major depression, anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. A *Medical Journal of Australia* editorial in 2006 warned that prisons were becoming the mental health institutions of the 21st century. The journal linked the rise in the number of mentally-ill prisoners to the reduction in the number of public and private psychiatric hospital beds across Australia from 30,000 in the early 1960s to 8,000 now.

The police shooting in Melbourne was the fourth in 2008, suggesting a deeply troubling escalation in the rate of police killings. The latest two, both this month, along with the growing calls for more tasers, are a warning that, as the economic crisis deepens and social tensions intensify, the official response will be to rely directly on state violence.



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