

Australia: Victims' families question police shootings in Sydney

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Victims' families have raised disturbing questions about three police shootings in Sydney, two of which occurred in the space of three days late last month.

The most chilling incident happened in broad daylight on a busy suburban street in front of scores of high school students. Several eye-witnesses told reporters that just after 12.45 p.m. on September 29, police suddenly surrounded a utility truck alongside the Castle Hill shopping centre and yelled at the driver to "get out."

Within 15 seconds, Rodney Elkass, 38, was shot dead, with at least three shots fired by plainclothes officers. One of the bullets entered his head, a police source told reporters. Pedestrians, motorists and students at a nearby library told reporters they were stunned by the violent and swift manner in which Elkass was killed.

According to an official statement, New South Wales Police had received a Triple Zero (000) emergency call reporting a man in a vehicle in the vicinity, allegedly armed with a firearm. Inconsistencies quickly emerged in the police story, however. "Police sources" told a local newspaper that Elkass had "fired the first shot," while other "police sources" said he had drawn a gun but not fired.

Angry family members, speaking to reporters after Elkass's funeral at Lakemba Mosque, said he had been harassed by a former work colleague in the lead-up to the fatal shooting. They said Elkass had been on his way to the Castle Hill police station to report a road rage incident when he was intercepted by police. A relative said the former workmate had seen a firearm in Elkass's vehicle and made a triple-0 call to police.

Elkass's brother, Zak, a police officer himself, said his brother was a member of a shooting club, had a licensed Glock pistol, and had no criminal convictions. "He was just your average Australian guy," he told the *Sydney Morning*

Herald.

While the full circumstances are not yet known, other recent police shootings have produced clear evidence of false police reports being issued to justify a rapid-fire use of lethal force.

Three days earlier, a police officer shot Justin McMaster, 19, in the stomach at his house in Colyton, western Sydney, after a home invasion by armed men at the premises. Seconds before he was shot, McMaster's mother had yelled out to police that he was her son.

McMaster, who was hospitalised with a bullet wound to his abdomen, told the media he had carried a length of metal from aluminium blinds to protect his sister, who was being threatened by an intruder with a knife.

Nevertheless, a NSW police media release on October 6 claimed that McMaster had been shot because he was "armed." It stated: "During the incident, an armed man approached police. A shot was fired and the 19-year-old man suffered a wound to his stomach."

A current coronial inquest into a 2009 Sydney shooting recently heard evidence of a concerted police cover-up. Adam Salter, 36, was killed by a police officer in the kitchen of his father's home in the suburb of Lakemba. A coronial inquest was told that Salter, who had previously suffered a psychotic episode, was being treated by ambulance paramedics for self-inflicted stab wounds when he got up and reached for a knife.

"My son had a knife at his own throat. How was he going to hurt anyone else?" asked Salter's father, Adrian at Glebe Coroners Court. The father, who witnessed the shooting at close hand, said the police had not assisted the paramedics but seemed to do "nothing but shoot him." This account was verified by three paramedics who testified.

Police situation reports falsely stated that before Salter was shot police had asked him to drop a knife he was holding. On the day of the shooting, acting Assistant Police Commissioner Stuart Wilkins told a media conference that Salter had “grabbed a knife from the kitchen and confronted police.”

The lawyer representing Salter’s family at the inquest, Stephen Rushton, suggested to the author of one of the reports, Detective Inspector Russell Oxford, that a section of it was “complete nonsense” and part of a “gross police cover-up.” Oxford denied this, claiming that the false section of his report had simply been “cut and pasted” from an earlier report.

The inquest heard that the internal “critical incident” investigation, also led by Oxford, had concluded that Sergeant Sheree Bissett, who shot Salter in the back, had acted according to police protocols because she believed the life of another officer had been in danger.

The inquest was told that Oxford and the NSW Police Professional Standards Command had effectively disregarded the evidence of three ambulance officers and Salter’s father, all of whom said Salter had not represented a danger to anyone other than himself when he was shot.

Given the recurring pattern of official justifications by the top echelons of the police force, the shootings cannot be explained as isolated responses by individual officers. Instead, they point to an institutionalised resort to lethal force, on the pretext that police officers feared for their own safety. A shoot to kill mentality is being inculcated, where officers open fire with scant regard for the lives of their victims or public safety.

Earlier this year, police in the neighbouring state of Victoria shot two people in Melbourne in the space of 18 hours. On both occasions, police chiefs also declared immediately that the officers had acted appropriately in self-defence (see: “Australia: Police gun down two people in Melbourne”).

The latest events further expose claims that arming police with Taser weapons would reduce fatal shootings. In both the McMaster and Salter incidents, the police had Tasers ready to use. In the case of McMaster, family members told reporters that a police officer had a Taser at the ready but lowered it just before McMaster was shot by another officer.

Since a wave of 69 fatal police shootings between 1984 and 1995, Australian state and federal police have been armed with more than 7,000 Tasers, on the pretext that the use of stun guns would avert further tragedies. Instead, shootings have continued, while the use of Tasers has soared, also leading to at least two deaths in the past year (see: “Australia: Police use Tasers as ‘weapon of choice’”).

Part of the reason for the ongoing death toll is the rising prevalence of mental illness, combined with the slashing of government funding for psychiatric and mental health services. A recent study found that more than half the fatal shootings by Victoria Police since 1982 involved people with mental disorders and that the proportion of mentally ill victims had increased over time. Successive federal and state governments are responsible for the fact that instead of receiving the care and assistance they need, people with mental health problems are confronted by armed police.

More broadly, these governments have created a deepening social crisis through the destruction of jobs and working conditions, and cuts to public health care, welfare and other essential services. Their response to the consequent social problems has been to blame the victims and resort to “law-and-order” demagoguery to divert attention from their own responsibility.

The result has not only been a boost to police numbers but the inculcation of attitudes among police that regard the resort to force, including lethal force, as a legitimate solution to problems they confront. The latest shootings are another warning about the police methods that will be used on a broader scale against youth and workers as they come into struggle over mounting job cuts, worsening inequality and social distress.



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