

Australian man dies after being tasered by police

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Kevin Norris, a 38-year-old roof tiler from the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney, died in police custody on January 11 after being tasered and capsicum-sprayed by police at a fast-food restaurant. He became the third person to die after being tasered by New South Wales (NSW) state police since 2010.

While information is scanty, press reports indicate that police were initially contacted about a domestic incident between Norris and his partner at their home, and were later called to a McDonald's outlet in the town of Mittagong.

Police alleged that Norris's behaviour was "troublesome" and "disruptive." They claimed that they became involved in an altercation with him. He was doused with capsicum spray, before being tasered and handcuffed by five police officers. Norris was taken to a police station, where police say he collapsed, and police and ambulance officers could not revive him.

According to Norris's girlfriend, Raylene Waters, he had been using the drug "ice" for the previous three days, and was in a disoriented state. One witness, quoted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, said Norris was "just popping up and down from over the counter."

Waters condemned the excessive force used by police. "I feel it was wrong to use the Taser on him," she told Channel 9. "They could've cuffed him. If there were that many police there, they could have held him down until they got him cuffed."

Norris's family also denounced the police response and questioned the use of tasers. David Norris told the Australian Associated Press: "I don't think the sort of punishment he got was appropriate. I've lost all respect for police officers."

Little has been reported about Norris' life. His

younger brother David said he had been "working every day" and had "started getting his life back on track." Waters said Norris had suffered drug addiction for some time.

Rates of ice addiction in rural NSW have reportedly soared in recent years, fuelled by pervasive unemployment and growing poverty. In some regional centres, experts say use of the drug has risen by up to 180 percent since 2013. This points to a deepening social crisis, compounded by a lack of services and facilities to deal with addiction and mental health problems.

Norris' death has again highlighted the rampant use of tasers by police, including against people under the influence of drugs. In the most notorious case, 21-year-old Brazilian student Roberto Laudisio Curti died in Sydney in 2012 after being tackled, repeatedly tasered and capsicum-sprayed by up to six police officers. Curti had been involved in a minor incident at a nearby convenience store, reportedly after consuming LSD.

Australian police were first armed with tasers after more than 60 fatal police shootings nationally between 1984 and 1995. Authorities claimed that the introduction of a new "non-lethal" weapon would avert further deaths. In reality, tasers are very deadly. According to Amnesty International, the weapon killed over 500 people during arrests, or in jail, in the US between 2001 and 2012.

At the same time, police shootings have continued unabated, and are now increasing in Australia. Since late September alone, police have shot dead four people in Queensland under dubious circumstances, indicating an underlying official "shoot to kill" policy.

Tasers have become a "force weapon of choice" for police, as noted by a 2010 report into a series of Taser incidents in Western Australia. In the three years from

2008 to 2011, some 7,000 tasers were rolled out nationally.

In NSW, the use of tasers has dramatically escalated since 2009, when the state Labor government of Nathan Rees allocated \$10 million to equip frontline police officers with the weapon. The resulting deployment of some 2,000 tasers was part of a “law and order” drive, carried out by governments throughout the country, aimed at expanding police powers and legitimising the use of force.

According to official figures, incidents in NSW involving police firing tasers soared from 126 in 2008 to 1,169 in 2010. Between 2008 and early 2013, some 40 teenagers under the age of 16 were tasered.

In response to the latest death, renewed calls were made for tighter restrictions on police Taser use. Anna Brown, from the Human Rights Law Centre, told the media: “What we’re seeing is tasers being used to achieve compliance in a manner that’s inappropriate or excessive.” She said there was an “urgent need” to issue regulations to curb their use.

However, the official response to the death of Curti, the young Brazilian student, shows that no such restrictions will be tolerated by governments or police chiefs. His death provoked international outrage. At a November 2012 inquest, the state coroner found that police had been “reckless, careless, dangerous, and excessively forceful,” yet an internal police investigation had cleared the officers of any wrongdoing.

The coroner recommended that police review the use of tasers, including whether the “drive-stun” mode should be outlawed and whether tasers should be issued to probationary officers. Following the latest death of Kevin Norris, however, a police spokesman said probationary constables were still allowed to carry tasers and the drive-stun function had not been banned.

In an attempt to assuage public anger over Curti’s death, assault charges were later laid against four of the officers involved. Last December, three officers, all of whom fired tasers at Curti, were found not guilty. The fourth was convicted of the least serious charge, common assault, and has yet to be sentenced.

The police have announced an internal investigation into the death of Kevin Norris, but the Curti case demonstrates that this will be nothing but a whitewash. The mounting death toll from tasers, and police

shootings, points to growing police violence directed against the working class under conditions of mounting social stress and inequality.



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