

Australian police kill mentally-ill man at Sydney's main train station

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29 July 2017

Police fatally shot Danukul Mokmool, a 30-year-old man with a history of mental illness, outside Sydney's Central train station on Wednesday evening. The shooting took place in one of the busiest areas of the city, as thousands of people were catching trains to return home from work. In footage of the incident posted online, witnesses can be heard shouting in disbelief as the police opened fire.

The incident is the latest in a series of shootings that have highlighted the increasingly militarised character of the police and the recourse of its officers to lethal force, especially when dealing with people suffering psychological problems.

Police claimed they received reports of a possible armed robbery at a florist shop next to Central station. Witnesses told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and other publications they saw a man behaving erratically inside the shop, threatening the florist with a broken bottle and demanding that police be called.

Police arrived at around 6:45 p.m. Mokmool left the shop and moved toward the officers holding a pair of scissors. Underscoring his distressed mental state, Mokmool had allegedly slashed his own arm. According to some witnesses, he shouted, "just shoot me." Police justified shooting Mokmool four times in the head and chest on the grounds he ran toward a plain-clothed officer.

Mokmool's tragic death raises many questions, including why police used lethal force when confronted with a clearly disturbed and suicidal man holding only a pair of scissors.

Over the past decade, police across Australia have been armed with a battery of other, supposedly non-lethal weapons, such as capsicum spray and tasers, on the pretext that it will lessen the likelihood of people being killed in such incidents.

Mokmool's brother, Charlie Huynh, told the ABC: "They could have done something better than just shooting him. Come on, like, he was just holding scissors." Huynh added: "They could have at least hit him to the ground, pepper sprayed him, stuff like that."

Fairfax Media reported that police officers initially used capsicum spray to try to subdue Mokmool. This is not apparent in the video posted online.

Mokmool suffered severe mental health issues. Huynh said his brother exhibited paranoid delusions the day of his death. Before Mokmool left his family home in Heckenberg, a working-class suburb in Sydney's southwest, he claimed someone would attack him. Mokmool, his brother said, often travelled to the city by public transport or went riding on his bike when he was distressed.

Mokmool was from a migrant family that had to cope with ever-worsening social conditions. In Sydney's southwest, the real rate of youth unemployment exceeds 40 percent. Successive federal and state governments, both Labor and Liberal-National, have slashed spending on public services, including mental health care. Funding for vocational training has been cut, forcing public college closures.

Mokmool reportedly suffered bouts of addiction to ice, a highly destructive drug that, according to social workers, is used at "epidemic" proportions by the most disadvantaged youth. George Bowie, a drug counsellor in the western Sydney suburb of Blacktown, told *news.com.au* he had seen a 40 percent increase in young patients suffering ice addiction in 2015.

Mokmool also spent time in prison. Upon release in 2014, he began attending a church group, and had medication for his mental illnesses. Huynh said he suspected his brother may not have taken his medication the day he lost his life.

Programs for people suffering mental illness have been gutted over the past three decades. Last year, the federal Liberal-National government imposed funding cuts targeting the few remaining in-patient mental health centres. Early Psychosis Youth Services, a national program for 12- to 25-year-olds who have or are at risk of suffering psychotic episodes, had its funding cut by 70 percent.

As access to medical care is increasingly denied to the mentally ill, they are condemned to homelessness, despair and social exclusion. The answer of the state to their condition is imprisonment or, as in the case of Danukul Mokmool, death.

The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare reported in 2013 that 49 percent of all prisoners across the country had been told by a health professional that they suffered a mental illness.

According to a 2013 Australian Institute of Criminology study, police fatally shot 105 people between 1989 and 2011. At least 42 percent of the victims suffered a mental illness. The most common issue was schizophrenia, accounting for 59 percent.

Only one fatal police shooting was classified as an “unlawful homicide.”

Among the most notorious cases was the 1997 shooting of Roni Levi, a French photographer. Police gunned him down on Sydney’s Bondi Beach, after friends reported he had a knife and was in a suicidal crisis. No attempt was made to de-escalate the situation.

More recent cases have followed a similar pattern, with fatal force directed at victims who posed no immediate threat.

In 2009, a police sergeant fatally shot Adam Salter, a 36-year-old suffering mental health issues. Salter’s family had reported to police that he was cutting himself with a knife. He was standing over a sink in the kitchen of his family home at Lakemba, a Sydney suburb. The police officer shot Salter in the back, killing him, after she reportedly shouted “taser, taser.”

In 2015, NSW police tasered and then fatally shot Courtney Topic, a 22-year-old with Asperger’s syndrome, at Hoxton Park, a working class suburb in Sydney’s southwest. Topic was carrying a kitchen knife near a fast-food restaurant when she was surrounded by four-heavily armed police. Witnesses said she was not threatening anyone.

Other incidents also indicate that police are being trained to “shoot first and ask questions later.”

On July 9, police shot Dale Ewins and Zita Sukys at a costume-ball in a Melbourne nightclub. Police claimed they received reports that Ewins was carrying a gun. Security guards from the nightclub, however, said they told police the gun was a replica, and was part of a costume. The couple, who survived their injuries, initiated legal action, alleging the police inflicted “assault and battery.”

Across the country, police numbers and budgets are being dramatically expanded. The Australian Federal Police received a \$321.4 million funding boost in the 2017 federal budget, with a substantial proportion allocated to recruitment. The Victorian Labor government announced December that it would hire 3,100 extra police officers over the next four years.

The build-up of the police force is part of a broader crackdown on democratic rights. Amid mounting inequality and poverty, it is a pledge from governments that they will respond to social distress with violence and brutality, while preparing to repress the struggles of workers and young people that the deepening crisis will provoke.

The mentally-ill are among the first victims.



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