

# Australian car attack highlights mental healthcare crisis

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Saeed Noori, the 32-year-old man accused of driving a vehicle into pedestrians in Melbourne's central business district on December 21, was remanded in custody on Wednesday, following a brief court hearing. He has been charged with 18 counts of attempted murder, and one count of conduct endangering life.

Of the 20 people hospitalised from the incident, two remain in critical conditions—an 83-year-old man and a South Korean male aged in his 60s. Fortunately, no one was killed.

Noori's lawyer Tass Antos indicated that his defence case would explore whether his client is mentally fit to make a plea or stand trial. Magistrate John Hardy ordered that Noori undergo a psychiatric examination.

What information has emerged about Noori paints a picture of a deeply unwell man. He has a long history of mental illness and addiction to crystal methamphetamine, commonly known as "ice." According to the *Weekend Australian*, Noori was involuntarily admitted to an acute psychiatric ward for two weeks earlier this year. Previously, it was revealed that he was receiving treatment under a government-sponsored mental health plan, which provides for a limited number of psychological treatment sessions.

Noori appears to be one of the millions of victims, direct and indirect, of the illegal US and Australian wars over the past 25 years aimed at subjugating the resource-rich Middle East. Accompanied by his sister, brothers and parents, he arrived in Australia in 2004 as an 18-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, which was invaded in 2001 as part of a US-led neo-colonial regime-change operation.

Before the December 21 incident, Noori reportedly lived in a government-subsidised housing estate in Heidelberg West, which is among the 5 percent of most disadvantaged suburbs in the country. He is married

and has a two-year-old son. His wife is said to be expecting their second child.

Medical health professionals responded by calling for an urgent government response to address the national crisis in mental healthcare, aggravated by decades of funding cuts at the state and federal level.

Patrick McGorry, professor of youth mental health at the University of Melbourne, told Australian Associated Press: "The system is completely unable to treat people safely, so we've had a great rise in suicides as well, and a smaller number of homicides. The public mental health system has basically been collapsing over the last 10 or 15 years, with inadequate funding."

McGorry noted a series of similar violent events across the state of Victoria by mentally ill individuals, including in January this year, when another man with a history of mental illness and drug abuse drove a car into Melbourne's crowded Bourke Street mall, killing six people.

McGorry said one Melbourne mental health service alone had reported 23 murders by patients in contact with the mental health system over 11 years. He added: "In the next 12 months we will see several murders which are preventable, committed by poorly treated psychiatric patients and we will see hundreds of suicides, which are mostly preventable."

The well-known expert continued: "Every night in emergency departments, people are being turned away with serious mental illnesses." McGorry estimated that 1 percent of the population used the mental health system, but that 3 percent were in need of it.

The mental health system crisis is a direct outcome of decades of bipartisan cutbacks and privatisations in the sector. The Keating Labor government led the assault. Its 1992 National Mental Healthcare Strategy committed state governments to close government-

funded specialised psychiatric institutions, in the name of moving patients into “community care.”

In the state of Victoria, the Kennett Liberal government closed all 14 of the state’s psychiatric hospitals between 1992 and 2000. The result has been a catastrophe, with the burden of care left on families themselves, as well as grossly underfunded not-for-profit and community organisations that are forced to compete for resources. Crisis Assessment and Treatment Teams (CATT) function as stopgaps in emergency situations.

Approximately one in five Australians experience some form of mental illness each year. Among young people aged 15 to 19, the figure was 22.8 percent this year, up from 18.7 percent five years ago, according to the latest government National Mental Health Card report. Among people aged 15-24, suicide is the single biggest cause of death.

Crystal methamphetamine usage has reached epidemic levels. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, more than 250,000 Australians, about 1 percent of the population, use the drug. This is the highest per capita usage in the world, approximately three times higher than that of the United States.

The response of the media and political establishment to the December 21 incident, however, has sought to prevent any analysis of the broader social causes of such a tragedy. As always with such disasters, they have tried to channel people’s natural humanitarian response toward the victims in a reactionary direction.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews declared that the incident was an act of “evil.” Liberal-National Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull similarly labelled it a “despicable, cowardly act.” Such comments are intended to block any examination of the underlying state of society.

The corporate media, with the Murdoch outlets in the lead, is seeking to foment a lynch-mob atmosphere against Noori and the more than 600,000 Muslims living in Australia. Noori’s address has been published, along with a picture of his home.

In an article on December 24 in Murdoch’s Sydney-based *Daily Telegraph*, “Let’s call terrorism what it is,” right-wing commentator Miranda Devine denounced the government for failing to lay terrorism-related charges against Noori.

Government and police authorities, without any

concrete evidence, initially aired the possibility that the event was a terrorist attack. They were forced to admit, however, following searches of Noori’s home and computer, that he had no connections to any terrorist organisation or ideology.

But for Devine, facts cannot be allowed to stand in the way. “Here we had a suspect who fit the profile of similar vehicle terrorist attacks in Nice, Jerusalem, Berlin, London, Stockholm, Barcelona, New York,” she asserted. “He’s a Muslim and a refugee.” Devine added: “Obviously the majority of Muslims in Australia are not terrorists, but the majority of terrorists are Muslims.”

A December 23 editorial in Murdoch’s flagship *Australian* newspaper declared that “the minority ... have shown they are unwilling or unable to accept our way of life, founded on Judaeo-Christian values.” Warning darkly about an “encroaching threat in our midst,” the editorial called for “a public conversation on the deportation of troublemakers who are not Australian, the need to raise the bar much higher before granting that privilege or even the deportation of dual citizens who attack our security.”

As these comments demonstrate, for the political and media establishment, the essential purpose of such tragedies is to justify the destruction of core democratic rights and the waging of predatory wars, as has been pursued continuously over the past 16 years under the banner of the “war on terror.”



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