

Murder of homeless woman in Melbourne a result of housing and mental health crisis

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Last week, 25-year-old Courtney Herron was brutally killed in the early hours of the morning in a park near central Melbourne, the capital of Victoria. Her murder has highlighted the crisis of mental health facilities in the southern Australian state and the deteriorating conditions confronted by sufferers who find themselves unable to access medical care or accommodation. Her death has provoked an outpouring of grief and anger among the community about the conditions that led to this tragedy.

Courtney and her two siblings grew up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne as part of what was described as a “beautiful and caring Greek-Aussie family.” According to media reports, she “attended exclusive Catholic school Genazzano FCJ College in Kew in Melbourne’s east from years seven to nine.”

Courtney battled depression and anxiety from a very young age. Due to a prior drug possession charge, she lost her job with the Victorian state government and then struggled to find stable employment.

When her partner, Ahmet Ozturk, a Kurdish refugee, was forced into a detention centre under Australia’s cruel visa laws, Courtney was particularly affected. Ahmet had overstayed his visa and missed an interview with immigration because he was caring for her and she blamed herself for his predicament.

From his detention centre in Brisbane, Ahmet spoke to media following Courtney’s death. “She was hospitalised a couple of times,” he said. “She had accommodation problems. She couldn’t get the help she needed. I personally witnessed that she couldn’t get it. Every time she was in hospital, I was talking to her. She was ringing me. She was in hospital for three to four weeks every time.

“They were looking for accommodation for her. She was trying to get treatment for the drug dependency,

but she had to be on waiting lists for months. She couldn’t get help and she ended up homeless.”

Courtney’s mother, Maxie, told the *Age* that her daughter was “shattered” by the series of setbacks in her young life. “Sometimes,” she said, “the Department of Housing would find her accommodation... but the places were so disgusting. Just putting a whole lot of people together with no support.”

Friends of Herron, who witnessed the young woman’s struggle with homelessness and methamphetamine addiction, believe that if she had had a safe bed in which to sleep she would still be alive. “She was trying to get on a housing list but they are really long. She was really frustrated about that and when she told me, she was crying,” Jessica Bateman told the *New Daily*, adding that “Melbourne’s dangerous homelessness issue is out of control.”

Herron was also unable to obtain a prescription for the medication that would help her cope with her methamphetamine addiction. It was due to her escalating mental health conditions and drug use that she found herself having to “couch-surf” and sleep on the streets. Each night, 28,000 people under the age of 24 across Australia are forced to sleep in unsafe conditions, like Courtney was on the night of her death.

There is a tragic similarity with the experiences of the alleged perpetrator, 27-year-old Henry Hammond, who also had a history of mental health and drug problems. He was raised in what was described as a “good family in northern Sydney suburb of Alambie Heights. He had a fiancé, a baby and had worked as a barber for a time,” but friends have described how he struggled to find his place in Melbourne after graduating school. Hammond’s schoolmates explained how inadequate mental health services played a role in his downward spiral.

“In 2017 something happened,” a female acquaintance told the *Age*, “he became psychologically dislodged,” experienced frequent delusions, and had to live in a van. His family has expressed its deepest sympathy to the victim’s family, stating: “Henry Hammond grew up loved by his family and friends. For many years he has struggled with mental illness, [and] more recently drug issues and homelessness.”

This tragedy exposes a deep crisis within Australia’s healthcare system, which leaves scores of young people and workers unable to receive the treatment they often desperately need. *Beyond Blue*, a not-for-profit mental health organisation, reported that over the past decade only 50 percent of Australians with a mental condition received adequate treatment.

Professor Patrick McGorry of the University of Melbourne has stated that over the past two decades there has been a “slow erosion of care” in Victoria, a state which now spends 13 percent less per capita on both community-based care and inpatient beds than the Australian average and less than any other Australian state.

The Victorian Labor Government is fueling an escalating mental health crisis through its constant slashing of health funding, particularly in working-class areas. Last August the state government cut \$75 million from mental health funding, largely using the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as a pretext. However, there are 130,000 people in Victoria with mental health needs not covered by the NDIS.

Over the past decade, the number of people seeking mental health care at public hospitals has increased by 60 percent and only 1 in 3 people requiring hospitalisation are able to access a bed. Victoria has the lowest number of full-time mental health medical staff per capita in Australia. Overall, Victoria’s access to mental health services is 39 percent below national average.

Young people who are denied hospitalisation are at a greatly increased risk of harming themselves or even ending their own lives.

The government’s response to this mounting crisis has been to fund more private hospitals. Under the two-tier healthcare system supported by both Labor and Liberal governments, wealthy Australians get access to top-quality private healthcare, while working people must rely on underfunded public services.

In the wake of Herron’s murder, proponents of identity politics have been quick to dismiss any suggestion that the lack of treatment for drug addiction and psychological problems contributed to the crime. This week, feminist Clementine Ford has absurdly denied that violent crime is a social issue, claiming instead that it stems from “the culture of a gender-unequal world,” where “Men don’t choose to kill their wives and girlfriends because they were born with the ‘bad man’ gene—they choose this course of action because patriarchy has convinced them they are entitled to...”

This dovetails with the comments of the Victoria Police whose spokesperson suggests that gender was the sole reason for Herron’s death and urged men to speak to their sons about how to interact healthily with women.

This response reflects the utter indifference expressed by the representatives of a privileged middle-class milieu whose gender-based politics covers up the culpability of governments in imposing the worsening social crisis onto the working class.

The truth is, those who commit such acts of violence are not “ordinary men” (or women for that matter), but more often suffer from unemployment, poverty, substance abuse and mental health crises. The criminally inadequate healthcare system in Australia is responsible for young men and women being deprived of the support they need to improve their lives.

Once again, the failures of the capitalist system have been blamed upon the working class. Courtney’s death was a tragic result of a broken social system, under which financial profit is put before human life.



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