

Australia: Mentally-ill man carries out stabbing attacks in Sydney

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A 20-year-old man with an extensive history of mental illness allegedly carried out two random stabbings in Sydney's central business district yesterday afternoon, before being tackled to the ground and subdued by members of the public.

The tragic outburst is the latest indication of a mounting crisis of mental health care after decades of cuts to services by state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike.

It followed a number of incidents, in which vulnerable individuals with major psychological issues have carried out violent acts or have themselves been killed by the police during mental health episodes.

Eyewitnesses reported seeing the man acting erratically, carrying a kitchen knife, near Wynyard Station, a busy train hub in the centre of Sydney.

Footage posted to social media shows him jumping up on the bonnet of a car stopped at an intersection, before running around aimlessly. He could be heard shouting "shoot me in the head." The statement indicates that the man may have been attempting to provoke a "suicide by cop."

He was eventually tackled to the ground by a group of passers-by who restrained him using a chair and milk crates. Footage aired by Channel Seven showed him in a confused and disoriented state in the back of a police van shortly after.

A woman was taken to hospital with non-life threatening knife wounds to the back. An hour after the attack, the body of another woman was found in a nearby apartment block. Police have stated that she was a sex worker, who was likely visited earlier in the day by the attacker. He allegedly slashed her throat before beginning his rampage through the city.

Initial attempts by right-wing activists and media personalities to present the incident as a "lone wolf"

terrorist attack, based on the fact that the man allegedly shouted "God is great" in broken Arabic, have rapidly been disproven.

Police and the media have identified the man involved as Mert Ney, a 20-year-old who lived with his parents in the working-class western Sydney suburb of Marayong.

New South Wales Police Commissioner Michael Fuller stated yesterday that Ney had a "not remarkable" criminal record which included "low-level issues around theft, malicious damage," and "domestic violence issues" which had not resulted in serious injury.

Fuller confirmed that Ney had a lengthy history of major mental health issues, bouts of homelessness and alleged drug use. The commissioner stated that Ney did not have any links to terrorist organisations. Former classmates and neighbours have described Ney as withdrawn and quiet, and as spending long stretches of time alone on his computer.

Unconfirmed media reports have suggested that Ney may have escaped from a mental health facility in the weeks or days leading up to the incident. Fuller stated that the young man's family had listed him as a missing person and had expressed concerns about his welfare to the police.

Little, or nothing, was apparently done by the authorities however to locate Ney or to ensure that he was safe. Fuller said that after receiving the report, police had merely placed Ney "on the system as 'keep a look out for him'."

While information about his background and psychological issues is scanty, it appears that Ney was among the many mentally-ill people who fell through the cracks of a dysfunctional health system and was left to his own devices.

Beginning in the 1980s, Labor and Liberal-National governments slashed funding for mental health spending. In that decade, New South Wales Labor governments oversaw the closure of a raft of mental health institutions.

At the same time, mental health programs have been gutted of funding and are woefully inadequate. The result has been that individuals with severe psychological issues have been condemned to homelessness, forced to live in run-down boarding houses or imprisoned for petty crimes.

When they have suffered psychological episodes, the mentally-ill have frequently been met with police violence.

The latest incident was the fatal police shooting of Todd McKenzie, a 40-year-old man diagnosed with schizophrenia, on August 12. Heavily-armed police stormed into his house after receiving reports that he was behaving erratically. He was shot five times, despite posing no threat to the public.

According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "7.30" program, of the 35 people fatally shot by police in NSW between 1997 and 2017, at least 19 were suffering from a mental illness.

This brutal record has coincided with a major spike in the incidence of psychological problems, especially affecting young people. According to a "Beyond Blue" statement, "One in four young Australians is currently experiencing a mental health condition." The charity organisation also noted that teenage years and young adulthood are when most serious psychological issues initially become apparent.

The spike in mental illness is bound up with a mounting social crisis. After decades of job cuts enforced by successive governments and the trade unions, and the running-down of TAFE and other educational institutes, working class youth face a future of low-paid work, poverty and joblessness.

In Blacktown, the largest suburb near where Ney lived, there are an estimated 1,600 teenagers who are not working or studying. Across western Sydney, an estimated 9,000 young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 are not employed or undertaking any training.

This deepening social distress, combined with a broader environment of mounting social and political tension, inevitably deepens the disorientation of individuals with untreated psychological issues.

The endless promotion of militarism and war, xenophobic attacks on immigrants, incessant warnings about supposed "Chinese interference," and the indifference of the entire political establishment to the issues confronting ordinary people, can only serve to heighten tendencies to paranoia and fear among those with underlying mental health problems.

There are indications that Ney was affected by the recent spate of violent incidents internationally. Police have alleged that he was carrying a USB drive that contained material about the terrorist attack at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, perpetrated by Australian fascist Brenton Tarrant in March, along with other information about a recent spate of mass shootings in the US.



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