

# Three Aboriginal deaths in custody in one week in Australia

Cheryl Crisp  
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After days of official cover-ups, it has been revealed that three Aboriginal people recently died in custody in one week alone.

The latest death occurred on March 7. An indigenous man died in Ravenhall Correctional Centre in the western suburbs of Melbourne, the Victorian state capital. On March 5, in New South Wales (NSW) a 44-year-old woman serving an eight-month sentence was found unresponsive in Sydney's Silverwater Womens Correctional Centre. Her subsequent death followed that of a 35-year-old man who suffered from a pre-existing medical condition and was found unresponsive in Sydney's Long Bay Jail Hospital on March 2. The cause of death is currently unknown.

In what can only be described as a breathtaking example of callous indifference and deception, the NSW deaths were not reported publicly by the Corrective Services Department, but revealed in a parliamentary budget estimates hearing into Corrections. Corrective Services Commissioner Peter Severin said the service did not make public such deaths due to a "Corrective Services policy." The Victorian Correctional Department took two days to report the death in Ravenhall.

According to Victorian Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has refused to meet with the families of the deceased.

NSW Greens MP David Shoebridge said NSW Corrective Services had described the woman's death as "unnatural" and acknowledged that "the likely cause of death was hanging in a cell with known hanging points." Removal of hanging points in jails was one of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report in 1991, yet Severin stated: "There is no dedicated budget for removing hanging points."

The three deaths occurred as the findings of the inquest into the 2018 death of 36-year-old Aboriginal man Nathan

Reynolds in Sydney were released. Reynolds died on his prison cell floor at John Moroney Correctional Centre in Sydney's western suburbs from an asthma attack one week before he was due to be released. NSW Deputy Coroner Elizabeth Ryan's report said Reynolds was deprived of "at least some chance of surviving his acute asthma attack" by the "confused, uncoordinated and unreasonably delayed" response to his emergency by prison guards and health staff.

Ryan declared that: "These failures were due both to numerous system deficiencies and to individual errors of judgement." The inquest heard that Reynolds, struggling to breathe, urgently called for help at 11.27pm on August 31, 2018. It took more than 11 minutes for correctional officers to reach his side, during which time other inmates desperately tried to assist him. At 11.48pm an ambulance was called and two minutes later the registered nurse on duty arrived, but by then he was already unresponsive. Paramedics pronounced him dead at 12.44am.

While Corrective Services was aware of Reynolds' history of asthma, no Asthma Action Plan was compiled in May 2018 when he entered the jail for a four-month prison term, despite his attendance at the prison clinic on multiple occasions. According to his sisters, Taleah and Makayla, their brother's health deteriorated markedly in that four months. During the eight weeks before his death he was issued with six Ventolin puffers, regarded by respiratory specialists "as a huge red flag," but still no plan was developed.

Ryan declared that the Corrective Services actions "did not even comply with NSW Health's own policies to prevent chronically ill prisoners from deterioration and death."

Nevertheless, Ryan declared that her focus "was not attributing blame." She ruled that Reynolds' death was from natural causes "contributed to by deficiencies in the management of his severe asthma ... and in the immediate

response to his medical emergency.” No charges have been laid.

Reynolds family responded to Ryan’s decision with fury, saying they will continue to fight for justice for the death of their brother.

In the Northern Territory, an inquest is underway of the death of 47-year-old Kumanjaji Bloomfield, who died in a car accident on the Plenty Highway near Harts Range while trying to evade police in July 2019.

Three other inquests are about to commence. In the northern Queensland city of Townsville, a coroner will hear of the death of a 39-year-old Aboriginal man, known as Noomba. He died at the hands of police, who used a neck hold banned in jurisdictions throughout the world. His wife had called the police because she was concerned about his mental wellbeing.

In Western Australia, a coroner will hear evidence on the drowning deaths in Perth’s Swan River of two Aboriginal teenagers. They entered the water, fleeing pursuing police, after police reportedly received reports of “teenagers jumping fences.”

Next month will mark 30 years since the 1991 Royal Commission report. The Hawke-Keating Labor government called the inquiry in 1987 after 99 indigenous deaths in custody had fuelled widespread anger. The inquiry was designed to channel the legitimate outrage of broad sections of the population—indigenous and non-indigenous—into the deadend and bankrupt perspective of an official investigation.

The Royal Commission resulted in not one person being charged or prosecuted, a record that has continued for the past three decades. In effect, as the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party, warned at the time, it gave a green light for the killings to continue with impunity.

Most of the Royal Commission’s 339 recommendations were designed to strengthen the operations of the state with the assistance of Aboriginal consultative and “watch” committees, which have become part of the system itself.

By 2019, according to the Australian Institute of Criminology, 455 indigenous people had died in custody as a result of abuse by correctional officers and police, denial or delay of medical treatment for pre-existing conditions or injuries sustained while in custody, accident and natural causes.

Of all deaths in custody, Aboriginal people comprise 18 percent despite constituting only 3.3 percent of the population. The overriding reason is the

disproportionately high incarceration rate of indigenous people. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the overall national incarceration rate for 2020 is 208 per 100,000 people. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rate is 2,333 per 100,000.

The figures also reveal that 4.7 percent of Aboriginal men were in custody, compared to 0.3 percent of the non-Aboriginal population. Almost a third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander defendants were jailed, compared to 18 percent of non-Indigenous defendants, despite the two groups having similar conviction rates (85 percent and 81 percent, respectively).

A petition signed by 15 families of Aboriginal people who died in custody has been presented to Prime Minister Morrison, calling on him to meet with them on the 30th anniversary of the Royal Commission report to explain why his government has done nothing to prevent the carnage inside correctional institutions and police custody. Morrison refused to meet with them.

This should come as no surprise. Over the past three decades, no government, Labor or Liberal-National Coalition, has enacted any measures that would address the growing death toll. This includes Kevin Rudd’s Labor government, notwithstanding his much-hyped 2008 apology to the Stolen Generation—the thousands of indigenous children forcibly separated from their families as a means of seeking to wipe out the Aboriginal population as a whole.

While racism certainly exists in the police and prison system, in the final analysis the reason for the level of Aboriginal incarceration rates lies in the fact that most indigenous people are poor and working class, as are the vast majority of non-indigenous prisoners, who are also dying in custody at a frightening rate.

The very fact that indigenous deaths in custody have continued since the Royal Commission highlights that the purpose of the inquiry was not to address the real causes but to quell the anger and opposition to the deaths. Appeals to Morrison, the government and the political establishment only serve to promote illusions that they can be pressured to act in the interests of the Aboriginal population.



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