

Outrage continues over police tasing of 95-year-old woman in Australian nursing home

Mike Head
23 May 2023

There has been an outcry in Australia and internationally over the May 17 police tasing of Clare Nowland, a tiny, frail 95-year-old great-grandmother living with dementia in an aged care home in Cooma, New South Wales. As a result of the police attack, Nowland fell. She suffered a fractured skull and bleeding on the brain, and is now in hospital receiving end of life care.

So shocking was the incident that it was widely reported around the world. Nowland, weighing only 43kg and just 1.6 metres tall, had allegedly been walking toward officers “at a slow pace,” using a walking frame, while holding a steak knife. Yet the police determined that she posed such a threat that they had to shoot her down with potentially lethal barbed taser darts.

The public has been so disturbed because what happened to Nowland, while particularly shameful, is not an aberration. It speaks volumes about two critical issues—the rising levels of police violence, especially against vulnerable and working-class people, and the appalling conditions in chronically-underfunded and understaffed nursing homes.

The callousness of the police response, and clear signs of a coverup, only heightened the anger and disgust. NSW Police Commissioner Karen Webb decreed that the police would not release the video of the shooting, captured on police body cameras, claiming it was protected under the Surveillance Act. She told the media she would not even watch the footage herself, saying she did not want to prejudice a police investigation. That investigation is to be conducted internally by the police force itself, led at the highest level by Assistant Commissioner Peter Cotter.

While the officer who opened fire with the taser, a senior constable with 12 years of experience, was suspended from duty five days after shooting Nowland, he remains on full pay. Regardless of his individual culpability, however, it soon became clear that this attack was part of a wider pattern of systemic police brutality.

Within days, family members of other aged victims of

police attacks came forward. On Sunday, Emma Grahame revealed that police had used handcuffs to restrain her mother, an 81-year-old, 45kg dementia sufferer in a Sydney nursing home in 2020, after being called by staff. Video of the incident shows the handcuffed woman, Rachel Grahame, howling in pain and distress, as six officers held her down. Emma Grahame only eventually obtained the video and police notes of the incident by using the state’s freedom of information laws.

In a third case, Kirsty McGregor said she and her family were not told when police were deployed against their 79-year-old mother, Norma Robertson, in 2020 at a Sydney dementia unit. McGregor only found out about the incident the next day, when she visited to find her distressed mother’s arms and legs covered in bruises.

Reports from the UK also showed the prevalent police use of tasers, including against a 10-year-old girl, an 11-year-old boy and a 93-year-old man with dementia. Police were investigated for manslaughter last year when Donald Burgess, 93, a dementia sufferer with one leg, died after being tasered by police at a care home in Sussex.

Tasers have long been known to be potentially deadly weapons. At least 49 police killings in the United States in 2018 were a result of tasers, following 500 fatalities in the decade to 2012.

In NSW, Labor Party Premier Chris Minns and his ministers moved to shield the police from the public outrage over Nowland’s treatment. Minns said it was “really important” for people to have confidence in the police investigation, saying it would be monitored by the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission (LECC).

The LECC is a nominally independent oversight body set up in 2017 by the previous Liberal-National state government in a bid to stifle mounting popular opposition to cover-ups of police killings. The NSW Greens’ justice spokesperson, Sue Higginson, took a similar line, saying police should ensure an LECC investigation into their

handling of such cases.

But an LECC report released this week on its first five years of monitoring NSW police investigations of critical incidents—ones in which police operations resulted in deaths or serious injuries—showed the sham of the LECC monitoring process.

The LECC reported a rising number of such serious incidents—157 over five years—with nearly half involving people experiencing mental health crises. It also revealed lengthy delays in police investigations and a lack of LECC powers to compel police to report incidents or provide testimony.

On average, the internal police investigations examined by the LECC took 20 months to be finalised. Only 52 of the 157 investigations had been completed, despite some stretching back to 2017. Few led to misconduct findings against police—just 16—with no indication as to what, if any, penalties resulted.

In just five years, 13 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had died in these police operations, while six were seriously injured, and that rate of indigenous death and injury had doubled in 2021-22, the most recent year covered by the report.

The toll may be even higher, because the report said it was up to the police force itself to decide whether to classify incidents as critical, and thus reportable to the LECC. In addition, a LECC representative attended less than half the reported critical incidents, leaving the police free of scrutiny at the scenes.

Moreover, the report said the LECC's power to live monitor interviews with the police involved was "illusory" because officers frequently denied permission for that monitoring. Police also could refuse to provide the LECC with their version of events, often on the grounds of avoiding self-incrimination—at least 29 had done so since 2017.

The LECC proposed greater training of police officers in mental health responses, but the report admitted that many such official and coronial recommendations had been made for years, without any improvement.

On any careful reading, the overall picture from the LECC report is that of an effectively lawless police force, authorised by successive governments, Labor and Liberal-National, to operate with impunity, resulting in escalating levels of police violence under conditions of mounting social tensions and stress.

Other evidence emerged this week of the underlying crisis in aged care, including the lack of resourcing, staffing and training for low-paid aged care workers to deal properly with dementia-related and other problems among elderly residents.

The nursing home where police tasered Clare Nowland, Yallambee Lodge, a 40-bed facility run by the Snowy Monaro Council, was under pressure due to high levels of occupancy, according to the council's most recent report.

That had resulted from the closure of private residential aged care services in nearby Bombala last year, due to the "inability to hire the required numbers of full-time staff members, including registered nurses."

The federal Labor government's aged care minister, Anika Wells, said the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission was conducting a separate investigation. Yet that is set to be a whitewash as well. Yallambee Lodge was audited against the government's aged care quality standards in February and assessed as fully compliant.

A quarterly report by that commission revealed an increasing number of violent incidents in aged care homes. Service providers reported 7,663 instances of "unreasonable force" in the last three months of 2022, the highest quarterly figure since records began in April 2021. Nearly 10 percent involved use of force by staff.

Neglect was reported 1,893 times in the final three months of 2022 and more than 170 aged care services did not meet mandated quality standards. The most common breaches were a lack of "safe and effective personal and clinical care" and "ineffective governance systems."

Continued underfunding of aged care by the Albanese Labor government, perpetuating decades of cuts, and the ongoing COVID pandemic, wilfully let loose by every Australian government, has intensified this crisis. More than 5,400 aged care residents have died from COVID in Australia, the majority under the Labor government over the past year.

The ever-more evident indifference by governments to the lives of the elderly is one of the starkest expressions of the growing human toll and social disaster being produced by the capitalist profit system.

The use of tasers under these conditions points to the essential nature of the police as an instrument of capitalist rule. So far, the victims have been predominantly vulnerable, ill or aged members of society, but the police licence to kill or maim is ultimately designed to be aimed against rising political and working-class opposition to the increasingly intolerable conditions of life.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact