

Mass stabbing in Sydney shopping centre by mentally ill man

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Horrific scenes unfolded in Sydney on Saturday afternoon, as a man roamed through Westfield shopping centre in Bondi Junction, stabbing random people in his path. Six victims have lost their lives. With at least eight others still in hospital, the toll may increase. The attack ended when the offender was shot dead by a police officer at the scene.

A mother was fatally stabbed, and her nine-month-old baby was also attacked. The dead include two young women in their 20s, a mother of two, a 53-year-old businesswoman and a security guard who was a refugee from Pakistan.

The attack was among the worst mass casualty incidents in Australia in recent decades. The shopping centre is one of the largest in Sydney, visited by tens of thousands of people every week.

Understandably, the incident has provoked widespread concern and anguish. Many have noted that the victims could have been anybody going about their shopping. Footage of the attack, captured on mobile phone cameras, gives the dreadful incident an immediacy that it would not have had in earlier times.

The ubiquitous media coverage of the past two days has been an exercise in cynical sensationalism, aimed at exploiting and profiting from these sentiments.

Almost as soon as the attack was over, corporate reporters were clambering over each other, shoving microphones and cameras in the faces of witnesses who were still clearly in shock. Details of the incident and images of it that need not have been made public were broadcast without the slightest concern for the victims' families, the media's professions of great sympathy notwithstanding.

The commentary, despite its volume, has been almost entirely devoid of social insight. It has dovetailed with the statements of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, New South Wales Premier Chris Minns and other official politicians. All have presented the mass stabbing as a senseless and unfathomable event, while glorying in the response of the police and promoting crass nationalism of the "how brave are Australians" variety.

However, while the details are still emerging, what has

been released thus far shows that far from being an event out of the blue, the mass stabbing was a product of a deepening social crisis, particularly as manifested in the evisceration of mental health services.

The perpetrator, 40-year-old Joel Cauchi, was publicly identified by police yesterday morning. The details of his life paint a predictably forlorn picture.

Born in the Queensland city of Toowoomba, in a suburb known for relatively high rates of poverty and crime, Cauchi was reportedly diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 17. Queensland Health has confirmed that Cauchi received mental health care through the public system until 2012, at which point he was transferred to a private provider for unknown reasons. For a period, he was well enough to have attended university.

For years afterwards, though, it seems that Cauchi moved around Queensland, without a fixed address or any employment. It is unlikely that he was receiving sustained and consistent mental health assistance during this period, given his itinerant existence.

At some point, Cauchi moved to Sydney, though when is not entirely clear. The only property that has been searched is an inner-city storage unit, reportedly no larger than around one cubic metre in size. Cauchi was reportedly homeless, but at this stage, no one knows.

Cauchi's prolific online history includes recent posts, asking in Facebook groups if strangers would go surfing with him and engage in other social activities. The loneliness is apparent.

A profile Cauchi created, advertising his services as a male escort, hinted at an increasingly desperate existence. Unconfirmed reports have suggested a history of using methamphetamine, a drug known to trigger psychosis.

NSW and Queensland police have both emphasised that Cauchi had no criminal history and had never been arrested. But there were clear red flags, which were not acted upon. Last year, Cauchi, still in Queensland, reportedly called the police, accusing his father of having stolen his knives. No action was taken, and no alarm bells rang about a mentally

ill man in conflict with his relatives over an unhealthy obsession with knives.

Already exhibiting signs of crisis, Cauchi arrived in Sydney, where his presence does not seem to have been noticed by any government agency, including in the health sector.

Sydney, the financial hub of Australia, is also the epicentre of a massive housing bubble. In the 12 months to July 2023, apartment rents in the city increased by more than 27 percent. Secure housing is unaffordable for many full-time workers; for the unemployed, it is an impossibility.

Meanwhile, mental health care is in a parlous state, having been cut back and privatised over decades.

A 2023 report by the NSW Branch of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists described mental health care in the state as “poorly funded, operating in crisis; Where people are falling through the cracks, with dire consequences; That’s ill-prepared to address community trauma, and in some cases, re-traumatising people; Where help is hard to access and often unaffordable; That’s complex, fractured and disconnected...” etc.

Among many similar comments, one anonymous psychologist bluntly stated: “There is almost zero access for people on Centrelink or low incomes to see a psychiatrist for assessment or medication review.”

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), established by the previous federal Labor government in 2013, and since expanded has effectively privatised the provision of mental health services. In addition to turning over the care of patients to a patchwork of for-profit operators, governments have declared that their own NDIS costs are too high and have insisted on the need for funding cutbacks.

How many people, like Cauchi, have been shut out of society, left to wander on their own and to deal with complex mental health conditions without a skerrick of assistance? It is likely that no one, including government authorities, knows because they have no interest. In a society dominated by corporate profit, such people are viewed by official institutions as a nuisance, unproductive and their needs a potentially expensive impost.

Most crises among this vulnerable cohort take a very different form, in the descent into drug addiction, self-abuse, and deaths of despair, including suicide. It is increasingly families who bear the brunt of the care and impact of their mentally affected loved one.

Why Cauchi’s breakdown took the violent form it did is not known and perhaps never will be. There are undoubtedly specific biographical dimensions. It has been noted that almost all of those attacked were women.

Whatever the details, though, it is undeniable that

Cauchi’s violent act occurred in the context of an eruption of violence on a far larger scale.

Most graphically, people are confronted every day with images of women and children being murdered in the most horrendous fashion in Gaza, as the Australian government and all the imperialist powers insist on “Israel’s right to defend itself” through the slaughter of an entire people. Australia is actively supporting the US-instigated proxy war against Russia in Ukraine that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and is on the frontlines of preparations for a disastrous conflict with China.

An atmosphere of officially-cultivated reaction, accompanying the program of militarism and war, was evident in the response to Cauchi’s attack. X/Twitter and other social media networks were flooded with right-wing propaganda, falsely claiming that Cauchi was an Islamic fundamentalist who had perpetrated a terror attack.

Other equally racist posts asserted that the perpetrator was Jewish. Extraordinarily, the Seven Network, one of the country’s largest broadcasters, incorrectly named the attacker, giving a common Jewish surname. The result was an avalanche of vitriol against the entirely innocent man named.

Seven has since apologised, blaming “human error.” Which humans and how they made the error has not been specified. Whatever exactly happened, the “mistake” had a decidedly inflammatory and antisemitic odour to it. That is notable, given that Seven, together with the rest of the official media, has sought to blackguard all opposition to Israel’s crimes over the past six months as antisemitism.

The elevation of violence by official society has also been evident in the response to Cauchi being killed. The police officer who fired the shots has been named, her photo emblazoned in the papers, alongside descriptions of her as a “hero.”

Aside from legitimising the use of force and violence by police in other, less extreme situations, this also serves to cover over the many questions raised by the police response. Under conditions where police numbers and budgets have grown every year, Cauchi was able to roam around one of the city’s busiest places, stabbing people at will for 15 minutes without an officer in sight. Multiple paramedics who responded had to be stood down and prevented from entering the centre to assist the dying and injured because police had not arrived.



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