

# Fatal police shooting in Melbourne triggers widespread outrage

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Two police officers shot dead a homeless man on April 17 in the inner-west Melbourne suburb of Footscray, in front of horrified Easter shoppers. Abdifatah Ahmed, 35, who had no fixed address and suffered mental health problems, was well-known in the busy Footscray centre, an area where rough sleepers tend to gather.

Two police officers arrived at the shops at 9 p.m., minutes after a Triple Zero emergency call. They opened fire on Abdifatah at close range, allegedly because he was armed with a knife and dangerous. One witness to the killing told the *Age* newspaper that the shooting seemed to go on “forever,” with an estimated six to eight rounds fired. A video taken seconds later showed the two police approaching him lying on the ground, and standing over him. He was then treated by paramedics, who were unable to save Abdifatah, and he died on a pedestrian crossing.

Shortly afterwards, a group of bystanders became enraged that the police had not tried to de-escalate the situation and began to verbally abuse them. This was to be the beginning of sustained community outrage at the killing, among both Somali-Australians and the wider working class.

On April 18, a vigil was held at the scene of the shooting, with 100 people attending. Members of the crowd held up homemade placards, with the main one asking, “Who are the police actually protecting?” Others stated: “Services not bullets,” “Stop police killings” and “Remember the one they killed.”

Vigil organiser Gemma Cafarella, vice president of civil liberties group Liberty Victoria, said: “This is a 35-year-old person who should have had his whole life ahead of him. What we need is investment in health responses, investment in housing, investment in social support.”

A larger demonstration, organised by members of the Somali community, of which Abdifatah was a widely known member, was held on Tuesday in the Footscray Mall, a few hundred metres from the scene of the shooting.

A poster at the scene of his death stated: “This is Abdifatah Ahmed. He was shot dead by police in Footscray a few days ago during a mental health crisis. He was not a criminal like the media was spinning. He was a vulnerable mentally unwell person who required assistance by professionals to de-escalate the situation in order to get the help he needed. All witnesses have stated the shock of how the situation was handled. Not OK.”

The crowd of 400 to 500 consisted of both African and non-African people, many of whom carried placards calling for “Justice for Abdi” and “Abdifatah needed support not bullets.”

A critical shortage of affordable housing, grossly inadequate mental health services and escalating poverty rates have seen increasing numbers of homeless people in Footscray and other inner-city meeting points.

The inner-west suburb has a long working-class history, and has seen waves of migrants move through, with immigrants and refugees from Africa now making their mark in the vicinity. But the factories that once served as a magnet to the new arrivals have largely disappeared, leaving a whole layer of unemployed young people. Lately there has been a considerable demographic shift, with riverside high-rise apartments catering to tenants who want to live in an inner suburban area close to services and easily within reach of metropolitan Melbourne.

Disparate layers were reflected in Tuesday’s demonstration, but the sentiment that unified the crowd

was expressed in the loud cheers when speakers expressed the need for “mental health services not guns.”

After over an hour of speeches, during which there were calls for an independent inquiry, demonstrators marched half a kilometre to Footscray Police Station. Shepherded by a phalanx of uniformed police, protesters chanted, “No justice, no peace.” Later as the crowd dispersed, there was a brief confrontation between a small section of demonstrators and police, with bottles being thrown.

In the past month, police have shot two people in separate, non-fatal incidents in Melbourne’s southeastern suburbs.

On March 29, police shot a man who allegedly charged at them with a metal pole in the outer suburb of Doveton. On April 4, a police officer shot a woman through the window of the car she was in, after she allegedly pointed a gun following a police pursuit.

Both incidents are being investigated by Professional Standards Command, an agency of the police itself, which is routine after a shooting. The same process will follow after the shooting of Abdifatah Ahmed, as well as a coronial inquest.

Victoria Police has a bad record of police killings. There have been multiple instances of mentally ill people holding knives being fatally shot by police. From 1987 to 1995, there were 24 police killings in Victoria. From 1995 to 2008, there were another 18. A large proportion of the victims had a history of mental illness.

In 2008, three police fatally shot 15-year-old Tyler Cassidy in a Melbourne skate park. He was armed with two knives and was suffering acute mental stress. His young age aroused public outrage against the police.

In May 2020, police killed a mentally ill man who was standing holding a knife while parked beside a Melbourne freeway. Police claimed they had tried to calm him down. In September 2020, a 24-year-old was shot by police in Lilydale. He was holding a knife and wandering confusedly.

When a coronial inquest is held, the coroner inevitably recommends that the police should receive more training in dealing with vulnerable young and/or mentally ill people, and should be accompanied by trained mental health professionals. The purpose of such inquiries is to create the illusion that the capitalist

state is responding to public outrage, while nothing changes and the police violence continues unabated.

The 2021 Royal Commission into Mental Health and Wellbeing was met with promises that the Labor government would implement all its recommendations. Recommendation 10 was that first responders to Triple Zero calls for mental health emergencies should be paramedics and not police. This was supposed to be implemented in September 2023, but Labor’s then Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, enforcing a law-and-order agenda, insisted it would not happen, claiming the reason was poor ambulance response times.

According to a parliamentary estimates committee, Recommendation 10 will not be implemented until 2027, four years late, despite funding being allocated to the justice and health departments.

State Labor Premier Jacinta Allan, as part of a deepening move to the right, is stepping up the government’s so-called “law-and-order” campaign. Casualties such as Abdifatah Ahmed are the consequence of this orientation.

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