

Australia: Indigenous man dies after being violently restrained by police

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Kumanjayi White, a 24-year-old Indigenous man with a disability and under state guardianship, died on May 27 after being violently restrained by police in full view of supermarket workers and shoppers in the Northern Territory (NT) town of Alice Springs. His death has ignited widespread grief and anger not only from the remote Aboriginal community of Yuendumu where White had close family ties, but nationally.

On Wednesday, a vigil and protest of hundreds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was held outside the territory parliament in Darwin, the capital of the NT. It followed similar events in Alice Springs and Sydney which begins a week of action across the country demanding justice for White.

According to multiple eyewitnesses, the incident in Alice Springs began when White was confronted by a supermarket security guard over the alleged theft of food items.

Two plain clothes police officers who were on the scene immediately became involved. What followed was physical restraint measures that many witnesses described as disturbing and excessive. White was forced to the ground, face-down and handcuffed. Several witnesses reported that one of the officers placed a knee behind his head as he lay on the supermarket floor.

White appeared visibly distressed, struggling to breathe. One witness said they heard him making gurgling noises before he lost consciousness.

The officers attempted CPR and paramedics were called, but White was later pronounced dead at Alice Springs hospital. The initial autopsy report stated that a definitive cause of death was undetermined. Authorities have indicated that forensic pathology results could take several weeks to finalise.

Shoppers who were present during the arrest have spoken out in the media, condemning what they saw as an unnecessary and dangerous use of force against a young man who posed no immediate threat. “They didn’t need to treat him like that,” one witness said. “You could see he was struggling, and they just kept him pinned down.”

Another recalled: “It was so fast. One minute he was standing, the next he was on the ground with someone’s knee in his neck. You could hear him trying to speak, then he went quiet.”

These accounts have intensified demands from the public, human rights organisations, Indigenous legal advocacy groups and White’s family, for answers and justice involving an independent inquiry.

The NT Police has rejected the demand outright. Acting Police Commissioner Martin Dole stated that the Major Crime Division would lead the investigation, with oversight from the NT Coroner. The police decision was immediately endorsed by NT Chief Minister, Lia Finocchiaro, leader of the Country Liberal Party government.

The commissioner and the government’s blatant rejection of independent oversight is in line with decades of internal state and institutional cover-ups, protecting police from prosecutions involving deaths in custody.

White’s family, particularly his grandfather an Indigenous elder Ned Jampijinpa Hargraves from Yuendumu, rejected the police’s response, demanding a fully independent investigation. “We cannot trust the police to investigate themselves,” Hargraves told the media. “There must be an inquiry by people outside the Northern Territory Police, people who will seek the truth.”

Hargraves said it is “disgraceful that police are already putting out stories that portray my *jaja* (grandson) as a criminal. We demand they stop spreading stories.... he was very vulnerable. He needed support and not to be criminalised because of his disability.”

To date, the NT police have refused to release CCTV footage from the supermarket or the body-worn camera footage from the officers involved. The NT officers have not been named or stood down even though an internal police investigation is said to have begun.

Amid growing fears of unrest in Alice Springs, the findings of the two-year coronial inquest into the 2019 police shooting of 19-year-old Kumanjayi Walker by officer Zachary Rolfe has been delayed. Originally scheduled for

release in early June, the findings are now postponed until July 7. Walker, like White, was from the remote community of Yuendumu.

The inquest into Walker's tragic death extended far beyond the immediate circumstances of the fatal shooting by Rolfe, who fired three shots, two at close range. It revealed allegations of systemic racism, cultural insensitivity, homophobia and the use of excessive, military-style force within the NT police. Rolfe was found not guilty and acquitted of all charges in a criminal trial in 2022.

White and Walker's deaths are not isolated tragedies—but are part of a longstanding and ongoing history of institutionalised state murders, neglect, cruelty and violence against Indigenous people, the most vulnerable section of the working class. White is the ninth Indigenous person to die in custody in 2025. Since the Hawke Labor government's 1987–91 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, close to 600 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in police or prison custody.

The number of Aboriginal people in custody has vastly increased every year. Not one police officer or prison official has been held accountable and criminally convicted over the deaths.

The continuation of state brutality, oppression and killing of Aboriginal people in custody proves that token promises and sham displays of concern by sections of the ruling elite, including the the Royal Commission itself, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations and the Closing the Gap program—have resolved nothing for Aboriginal people. In fact, conditions of life on virtually every socio-economic indicator for the vast majority of the Aboriginal population have drastically worsened.

The 2024 Closing the Gap report noted that adult indigenous incarceration rates continued to rise significantly in 2023, reaching 2,265.8 per 100,000, up by 114.7 per 100,000 from the previous year. This data alone indicates the Albanese federal and state Labor governments' response to the social and economic crisis impacting on the most oppressed sections of the working class, is to adopt more punitive law and order measures.

The NT has the highest rate of Indigenous incarceration in Australia, with Aboriginal people frequently imprisoned for minor offences and unpaid fines. In some remote communities, Aboriginal adults are jailed at rates exceeding ten times the national average.

The tragic death of Kumanjayi White is a devastating illustration of a broader and worsening social crisis, rooted in the economic conditions confronting the working class nationally. Aboriginal communities in the NT remain among the most disadvantaged in Australia, with their appalling living conditions the result of decades of government cuts to

welfare, housing, healthcare and mental health services, cuts that are also increasingly affecting broader sections of the working class throughout the country.

White, a young man with known cognitive and mental health impairments, was vulnerable and in need of support. Instead, he was subjected to surveillance and criminalisation. Former Alice Springs supermarket worker Gene Hill, recently spoke to the media and recalled his encounters with White: "One glance at him and you can see he's got special needs." Hill described assisting White on several occasions, including buying him food and explaining that items needed to be paid for.

Like many victims of police violence, White was poor, had a disability and needed continuous support. His case reflects a broader pattern, with a growing number of vulnerable people being harmed by an increasingly punitive system. The criminalisation of mental illness is the direct result of decades of bipartisan neglect, as successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have slashed funding to mental health services, shifting responsibility onto the police and prison systems.

While Aboriginal people are disproportionately impacted by the violent incarceration system, police repression affects all oppressed layers of the working class, regardless of race or nationality. Racism in policing reflects not merely individual prejudice, but the conscious cultivation by the ruling class of backward and right-wing elements within law enforcement to defend capitalism—not a racial hierarchy, but the profit system itself.

The common thread among victims of police brutality and deaths in custody, is their class. That is why the fight against police violence must be rooted in the unified struggle of the working class, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, against capitalism itself.



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