

Inquest into the police killing of Aboriginal teenager Kumanjayi Walker

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The police shooting of 19-year-old Kumanjayi Walker on November 9, 2019, in the remote Aboriginal community of Yuendumu, Central Australia, triggered a protracted legal and coronial process that underscored the brutal reality of his death.

Far from an isolated event, Walker's killing exemplifies the consequences of intergenerational poverty, entrenched state violence against Aboriginal people, and decades of government neglect. His death joins a long and tragic list of Indigenous deaths in custody—disproportionately affecting one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

Nearly five years later, Northern Territory (NT) Coroner Elisabeth Armitage delivered her findings. The inquest, held over 66 days across nearly three years, included testimony from more than 70 witnesses and resulted in a 683-page report delivered in Yuendumu on July 7. Armitage issued 33 recommendations as part of the inquest, but even if adopted, they will not halt state killings or the plight of Aboriginal communities. As with past inquiries and inquests, their real purpose is to defuse growing anger and unrest in Aboriginal communities.

Kumanjayi Walker was shot three times at close range by then-Constable Zachary Rolfe during an attempted arrest. Four days later, Rolfe was charged with murder but acquitted by a jury in March 2022.

Rolfe's history of violence against Aboriginal people and racist text messages were excluded from the trial. No Aboriginal jurors were included, despite nearly one-third of the NT's population being Indigenous.

Unlike the narrow focus of the criminal trial, the coronial inquest examined, at least to some extent, the broader context including police racism, misconduct and the antagonism between law enforcement and Indigenous communities.

Rolfe issued repeated legal challenges to the inquest and initially refused to testify, citing the risk of self-incrimination. He only participated after multiple failed appeals.

Despite these obstacles, the inquest pointed to the deeper social context of Walker's life, the entrenched poverty and disadvantage in Yuendumu, and Rolfe's record, in a police culture marked by violence, racism and impunity.

In her opening, Armitage stated that Walker's death was "avoidable" and reflected "officer-induced jeopardy"—a situation where police escalate or create danger, later used to justify the use of deadly force.

She found that although Rolfe had tactical training, he ignored a

planned arrest strategy devised by local officers and endorsed by police superiors in Alice Springs. Instead, he took charge.

In the months leading up to the shooting, Rolfe filmed and shared footage of violent arrests—primarily involving Aboriginal men. He reportedly replayed the footage for friends and colleagues. At least five of these arrests involved excessive force.

By mid-2019, multiple complaints had been lodged against Rolfe for alleged assaults, typically involving Aboriginal people. Some incidents resulted in head injuries. Yet the NT Police failed to act decisively, either dismissing concerns or providing inadequate supervision.

The inquest painted a disturbing portrait of both Walker's life and Rolfe's conduct. Born in October 2000 into extreme poverty, Walker grew up in overcrowded and unstable housing, surrounded by family violence and neglect.

From infancy, he suffered untreated health issues such as ear and chest infections—common in remote communities with inadequate health infrastructure. Medical experts later diagnosed him with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), ADHD, and a mild intellectual disability, all of which impaired his impulse control and decision-making.

By age 11, Walker had begun using substances and was repeatedly arrested for minor offences. Between the ages of 13 and 19, he was mostly in juvenile detention or under court orders. At the time of his death, Walker had absconded from rehab to attend his grandfather's funeral and take part in *malamala* (sorry business)—a cultural duty.

Rolfe, a former Australian Defence Force (ADF) soldier, served in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2015 and received specialist weapons training in the US. Although he did not see combat, the inquest heard that ADF-trained NT officers were statistically more likely to draw their firearms.

The coroner found that Rolfe openly expressed racist views, describing Aboriginal people in text messages as "grubby fucks," "coons," and "neanderthals." Coroner Armitage concluded that this dehumanisation made Rolfe less likely to exercise caution and more inclined to resort to violence.

This kind of dehumanisation is not incidental but consciously cultivated in institutions of state violence. In the military, soldiers are systematically trained to see the enemy as less than human—a necessary ideological preparation for the brutalities of war, such as those committed by Australian forces in Afghanistan. The parallels with the NT police are stark. In both cases, racist ideology

functions to legitimise the use of force and maintain control over oppressed populations.

In the NT police, this dehumanisation is expressed in the routine racism directed at Aboriginal people—who are not treated as human beings with rights, but as criminals to be monitored, harassed, and subdued. Racism is not an unfortunate by-product of these systems but an essential ideological weapon used to justify the violence that state forces exist to carry out.

Racism, however, was not confined to Rolfe. The inquest revealed it was “normalised” at the Alice Springs police station, where racial slurs were routine, and an informal “Coon of the Year” award circulated within Tactical Response Group ranks.

The NT Police also encouraged a culture of disbelief toward Aboriginal complaints. Oversight mechanisms—such as mandatory Custody Injury Reports—were routinely ignored. A pattern of impunity developed, reinforcing Rolfe’s belief that he could act without consequence.

Every official inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody—including the 1987–91 Royal Commission—has functioned as a whitewash. While generating volumes of recommendations and token reforms, they have done nothing to address the underlying causes involving police violence and social deprivation.

Instead, these inquiries serve to deflect public anger, act as a damage control mechanism and shield the state apparatus. Since the Royal Commission, nearly 600 Indigenous people have died in custody—yet not a single police or corrections officer has been convicted.

The inquest into Kumanjayi Walker’s death is no exception. The recommendations were highly limited, all accepting the framework of a substantial police force, which, given the function of the state and the grinding levels of poverty in the Northern Territory, inevitably employs violent repression.

Calls for greater anti-racist education within the police force, and the depiction of widespread racism as a “cultural problem,” serve to cover over that fundamental social reality.

Only weeks before the inquest findings were delivered, another young Aboriginal man from Yuendumu, Kumanjayi White, 24, died after being violently thrown to the ground and restrained by two plainclothes NT police officers in a Coles supermarket aisle in Alice Springs. Eyewitnesses were shocked at the violent force used. It was alleged White had been stealing food.

Despite public outrage and nationwide protests, the officers involved in White’s death have not been stood down. Video footage of the incident has not been released, and both the NT Police and government have refused to conduct an independent inquiry.

The NT maintains the highest Indigenous incarceration rate with Aboriginal adults in remote areas imprisoned at more than ten times the national average—often for minor offences or unpaid fines. Children are not spared. Instead of support services, they face repression.

Governments—both Labor and Liberal—have intensified punitive “law and order” measures. Despite the promises of the *Closing the Gap* framework, the Albanese government’s 2024 report showed rising Indigenous incarceration and worsening social and

economic indicators across the board.

In response to deepening poverty the government’s response is to expand police powers. The NT government plans to recruit 200 additional officers, even though it already has the highest police-to-population ratio. Between 2010 and 2020, the NT Police hired 718 officers—over a quarter of whom came from the ADF or overseas forces—highlighting concerns about police militarisation, a trend noted in the inquest.

The findings of the Walker inquest underscore some essential truths.

Like the vast majority of victims of police violence, both Kumanjayi Walker and White were poor. Many suffer from a disability requiring support, which governments refuse to provide. Their tragic deaths reflect a broader pattern, with a growing number of vulnerable people being harmed and criminalised by an increasingly punitive and repressive system.

While Aboriginal people are disproportionately targeted by police and incarceration systems, the repression they face is not isolated—nor reducible to race alone. Police violence is experienced by workers and the oppressed internationally, and is fundamentally a weapon of class rule.

The expanding size, budgets, and militarisation of police by capitalist governments reflect deepening inequality, rising class tensions, and growing unrest. The brutalisation of Aboriginal communities is the sharpest expression of a broader assault on the working class, with Aboriginal workers and their families bearing the most visible and violent repression.

In every country racism is deliberately fostered to divide workers and obscure the root cause: a capitalist system that deems the working class—especially its most vulnerable layers—expendable.

The fight against police violence, therefore, cannot be won through reforms or inquiries that leave the system intact. It must be waged as part of a united struggle by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers alike including workers of every nationality and race—against the capitalist order itself.



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