23-year-old Aboriginal man dies in police custody in South Australia

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A 23-year-old Aboriginal man from the APY (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara) Lands died in police custody on July 24, 2026, after his arrest by South Australia Police (SAPOL) on West Terrace in state capital Adelaide's central business district.

Police say they responded to reports of a fight in the car park of the Elephant and Castle Hotel and calls that a man was smashing cars and "may be armed with a knife." When officers arrived, they found the man holding a "piece of wood or a stick" which he put down when ordered.

Four officers then moved to arrest him. Police claim he "resisted," that there was a struggle, and that he was biting. Within minutes of being restrained on the ground he became unresponsive and died at the scene, despite CPR and ambulance attendance.

SAPOL has confirmed that the entire incident was recorded on body-worn cameras worn by the attending officers, but no footage has been released to the public. The officers involved remain on active duty; none has been suspended or stood down.

As always in such cases, the state is now "investigating itself:" Major Crime will prepare a report for the coroner, the Police Commissioner has ordered an internal inquiry, and SAPOL's Ethical and Professional Standards Branch is conducting a review under the formal oversight of the Office for Public Integrity. These processes are presented as mechanisms of accountability, but their record is clear: decade after decade, hundreds of deaths in custody across Australia—disproportionately affecting Indigenous people as a particularly vulnerable section of the Australian working class—and not a single police officer or prison official criminally convicted.

The pattern is borne out in recent deaths in custody in South Australia.

In June 2025, 42-year-old Punjabi-Australian man Gaurav Kundi was arrested by SAPOL in Royston Park, in Adelaide's inner east, after officers were called to a disturbance on Payneham Road. During the arrest, Kundi became unresponsive and was taken to the Royal Adelaide Hospital, where he died two weeks later; police have formally accepted that his death was a death in custody "as a consequence of the incident."

His family alleged that an officer knelt on his neck, invoking the memory of George Floyd who was murdered by a police officer during an arrest in Minneapolis, USA in May 2020, but the police Commissioner's Inquiry later asserted, on the basis of body-worn camera footage, that "at no point was a knee placed on Mr Kundi's neck," and that his head was never forced against the ground or vehicle. A Major Crime investigation and Commissioner's Inquiry were opened, with oversight from the Office for Public Integrity, but no officer was charged or suspended.

In June 2026, a 44-year-old man died during an arrest in the regional town of Clare, about 140 kilometres north of Adelaide.

Police were called to Opie Street after reports of a man armed with a metal pole, damaging property and threatening neighbours. SAPOL says officers attempted to disarm him and deployed an Electronic Control Device (taser); the device was later described as "ineffective," and witnesses reported a chaotic struggle in which the man continued to move and resist before collapsing. During the arrest he became unresponsive and was pronounced dead at the scene despite first aid and ambulance treatment.

As with the West Terrace death, detectives from Major Crime and Ethical and Professional Standards are investigating, a Police Commissioner's Inquiry has been launched, body-worn camera footage is being reviewed and a report will be prepared for the coroner. Again, no officer has been suspended.

These deaths are occurring under the South Australian Labor government of Premier Peter Malinauskas, re-elected in March 2026 on a platform that combined no cost-of-living relief with continued "tough on crime" rhetoric.

Successive Malinauskas government budgets have extended the law-and-order framework: new and upgraded police stations, increased resources for "frontline services," while maintaining cuts to public housing, mental health care and community services inflicted over previous decades.

Nationally, Indigenous people are statistically more likely to be victims of police violence because of historic oppression and their position as an impoverished section of the working class.

"Closing the Gap" reports document worsening incarceration rates, health and housing disparities and an Indigenous prison population now representing more than a third of all prisoners despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people making up

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only around four percent of the population.

In 2024–25 there were a total of 113 deaths in custody across Australia: 90 in prison, 22 in police custody or custody-related operations and one in youth detention. Thirty-three of the dead were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, the highest annual Indigenous toll since systematic records began and almost 29 percent of all custodial deaths.

Since the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, at least 617 Indigenous people have died in prison, police custody or youth detention.

The most recent data on who ends up in custody makes clear that the driving force is class. People entering prison are overwhelmingly drawn from the poorest layers: large proportions were homeless or in unstable housing, unemployed, living with mental health conditions or disabilities, and had recent histories of drug use.

More than a third of recent deaths in custody involved people who had not been convicted of any crime, reflecting the rapid rise of the remand population—unsentenced prisoners now make up around 42 percent of the prison population—as bail laws are tightened and police adopt more aggressive arrest practices. Australia's prison population grew by six percent in a single year, even as governments of both major parties cut or froze funding to social services, housing and welfare. This is not the outcome of "rising crime," but of a deliberate policy in which the prison and police system expands to absorb the social consequences of austerity.

The APY Lands, where the young man killed on West Terrace had his family, exemplify this process. They are among the most remote and impoverished regions in Australia, with chronic underfunding in housing, health, education and basic services; unemployment is pervasive, and social problems are compounded by decades of neglect and broken promises under "Closing the Gap" frameworks. Residents live under heavy police presence , while access to health care or emergency support is patchy and delayed. For people from communities like the APY Lands, encounters with police in Adelaide or regional centres are not exceptional but routine—and increasingly, they are deadly.

The official response to Indigenous oppression over the past three decades—royal commissions, parliamentary apologies, "Closing the Gap" agreements and, most recently, the Voice to Parliament—has treated it as a discrete problem to be solved by Indigenous-specific institutions within the capitalist state. The reality is that these mechanisms have enriched a narrow layer of Indigenous administrators, consultants, CEOs and land council officials while leaving the social conditions of the vast majority of Aboriginal workers and youth to deteriorate.

The Voice to Parliament was the most developed expression of this orientation. It did not emerge from a grassroots movement from below, but from a 2015 meeting at Kirribilli House between Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott—whose government had just slashed more than $600 million from Indigenous programs—and prominent figures of the Indigenous elite such as Noel Pearson and Megan Davis. The project sought to integrate a privileged Indigenous stratum more directly into the machinery of government.

For the Albanese Labor government, the Voice served a specific function: to provide a progressive façade for a program centred on austerity, militarism and the expansion of police powers.

Corporate boardrooms, the trade union bureaucracy and significant sections of the Liberal-National establishment rallied behind the "yes" campaign. The referendum was defeated in October 2023, but the basic political logic remains dominant: that Indigenous oppression can be remedied by new advisory structures and symbolic recognition within the existing state.

The reality documented by the deaths in South Australia and the national statistics is that the oppression of Aboriginal people is a concentrated expression of the same capitalist system that produces poverty, austerity and state violence for the working class as a whole.

Further royal commissions, internal investigations or constitutional bodies function to divert anger and shield the institutions of repression. The answer lies in the independent political mobilisation of the working class, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, against the capitalist system itself.

The deaths of the APY Lands man on West Terrace, of Gaurav Kundi in Royston Park, and of the 44-year-old in Clare are manifestations a state that defunds social services, deepens inequality and then uses its armed apparatus to enforce that social order. Confronting that reality demands a conscious, unified struggle to overturn it and to build a society in which health, housing and human dignity are guaranteed.

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