



IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

COR 2017 000773

FINDING INTO DEATH FOLLOWING INQUEST

Form 37 Rule 63(1)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Inquest into the Death of Dean Jenkins

Delivered On: 14 May 2025

Delivered At: Coroners Court of Victoria
65 Kavanagh Street, Southbank

Hearing Dates: 14 May 2025

Findings of: Judge John Cain, State Coroner

Counsel Assisting the Coroner Ms Jess Syrjanen, Senior Coroner's Solicitor

Keywords Unascertained cause of death; missing person

INTRODUCTION

1. On 15 February 2017, Dean Jenkins was 33 years old when his remains were located in a paddock in Woorinen, Victoria. Dean was last seen alive on the morning of 24 August 2016.
2. Dean was born to parents Wayne Jenkins and Debra Cummings, and had two siblings, Rebecca and Steven Jenkins. Dean grew up in the Swan Hill area and attended the local primary and secondary school in Swan Hill. Dean left school when he was about 14 years old to pursue a career in rendering and plastering. Dean had three daughters from two prior relationships. His access to his daughters was limited due to Family Violence Intervention Orders (FVIOs) and Dean's drug use.
3. Dean regularly came to the attention of Victoria Police for drug, dishonestly and violence-related offences. Dean had a significant history of drug use and previously experienced an overdose on 'juice' (gamma hydroxybutyrate) for which he was hospitalised. Debra observed that the last few times she saw Dean, "*he was off his tree*",¹ but still stated that he wanted to "*get his life straighten [sic] out so he could have his kids*".²

THE PURPOSE OF A CORONIAL INVESTIGATION

4. Dean's death constitutes a 'reportable death' under the *Coroners Act 2008* (Vic) ('the Act') as the death occurred in Victoria and the death appears to have been unnatural and unexpected.
5. The jurisdiction of the Coroners Court of Victoria is inquisitorial. The role of the coroner is to independently investigate reportable deaths to ascertain, if possible, the identity of the deceased, the cause of death and the circumstances in which the death occurred.
6. It is not the role of the coroner to lay or apportion blame, but to establish the facts. It is not the coroner's role to determine criminal or civil liability arising from the death under investigation, or to determine disciplinary matters.

¹ Coronial Brief (CB), Statement of Debra Cummings, 21 September 2016, 76.

² Ibid.

7. The expression ‘cause of death’ refers to the medical cause of death, incorporating where possible, the mode or mechanism of death.
8. For coronial purposes, the phrase ‘circumstances in which the death occurred’ refers to the context or background and surrounding circumstances of the death. Rather than being a consideration of all circumstances which might form part of a narrative culminating the death, it is confined to those circumstances which are sufficiently proximate and casually relevant to the death.
9. The broader purpose of coronial investigations is to contribute to a reduction in the number of preventable deaths, both through the observations made in the investigation findings and by the making of recommendations by coroners. This is generally referred to as the Court’s ‘prevention’ role.
10. Coroners are also empowered to:
 - a) report to the Attorney-General on a death;
 - b) comment on any matter connected with the death they have investigated, including matters of public health or safety and the administration of justice; and
 - c) make recommendations to any Minister or public statutory authority on any matter connected with the death, including public health and safety or the administration of justice.
11. These powers are the vehicle by which the prevention role may be advanced.
12. All coronial findings must be based on proof or relevant facts on the balance of probabilities. In determining these matters, I am guided by the principles enunciated in *Briginshaw v Briginshaw*.³ The effect of this and similar authorities is that coroners should not make adverse findings against, or comments about individuals, unless the evidence provides a comfortable level of satisfaction that they caused or contributed to the death.

³ (1938) 60 CLR 336.

13. The proof of facts underpinning a finding that would, or may, have an extremely deleterious effect on a party's character, reputation or employment prospects demands a weight of evidence commensurate with the gravity of the facts sought to be proved.⁴ Facts should not be considered to have been proven on the balance of probabilities by inexact proofs, indefinite testimony or indirect inferences. Rather, such proof should be the result of clear, cogent or strict proof in the context of a presumption of innocence.⁵
14. Victoria Police assigned Detective Senior Constable (**DSC**) Sarah Kaye to be the Coroner's Investigator for the investigation into Dean's death. DSC Kaye conducted inquiries on my behalf and submitted a coronial brief of evidence.
15. This finding draws on the totality of the material obtained in the coronial investigation of Dean's death. In writing this finding, I do not purport to summarise all of the material evidence but refer to it only in such detail as appears warranted by forensic significance and narrative clarity. It should not be inferred from the absence of reference to any aspect of the evidence that it has not been considered.

MATTERS IN RELATION TO WHICH A FINDING MUST, IF POSSIBLE, BE MADE

Identity of the deceased, pursuant to section 67(1)(a) of the Act

16. On 1 March 2017, then-Deputy State Coroner, Iain West, made a formal determination identifying the deceased as Dean Jenkins, born 28 July 1983, via DNA comparison.
17. Identity is not in dispute and requires no further investigation.

Medical cause of death, pursuant to section 67(1)(b) of the Act

18. Senior Forensic Pathologist Dr Malcolm Dodd, from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (**VIFM**) conducted an autopsy on 17 February 2017 and provided a written report of his findings dated 19 April 2017.
19. The remains were largely skeletonised, however, there was a large confluent mass of dry variegated brown parchment like mummified area of skin overlying the scalp. A near-

⁴ *Anderson v Blashki* [1993] 2 VR 89, following *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938) 60 CLR 336.

⁵ *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938) 60 CLR 336, 362–3 (Dixon J).

complete skeleton was received with some small bone elements not accounted for. The missing elements included the left foot bones and several carpal bones from the left hand and also some distal phalanges.

20. There was no evidence of trauma on any of the bony elements recovered.
21. Due to the advanced state of decomposition and total skeletonisation, no appropriate biological samples could be submitted for toxicological analysis, other than small strands of hair. Common drugs were not detected from these samples.
22. Dr Dodd noted that the location of the body within a pre-existing burrow would indicate that the body had been placed there in an intentional manner. There was also evidence that the burrow had been widened on one edge to accommodate the body. As such, Dr Dodd opined that the findings were “*highly suspicious and suggestive of foul play*”.
23. Dr Dodd provided an opinion that the medical cause of death was *I(a) unascertained*.
24. I accept Dr Dodd’s opinion as to the medical cause of death.

Circumstances in which the death occurred, pursuant to section 67(1)(c) of the Act

25. On the morning of 23 August 2016, Dean visited his friend, Neville ‘No Money’ Johnson, at his caravan in Swan Hill. Dean was driving a small blue sedan which was “*blowing smoke*” and was missing registration plates.⁶ Dean left some clothing and other items at Neville’s caravan one week earlier and returned to collect same. Neville recalled telling Dean to drive the car home and not use it anymore as it was “*ready to break down*”, had no plates on it and was unregistered. Dean reportedly told Neville that “*six Rebel bikies*” turned up at his house and he purchased a motorcycle from a ‘bikie’ for \$100, even though he knew it was worth \$12,000.⁷ Dean also explained that this bikie was paying \$100 per week to “*some guys from Lake Boga*”. Neville warned Dean to “*stay out of it*” and that the people who originally owned it might come back and repossess it. Dean reportedly did not appear concerned and left in the blue sedan.⁸

⁶ CB, Statement of Neville Johnson, 25 August 2017, 142.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

26. Dean then attended the home of his friend, Douglas Tarrant. Douglas reported that Dean confided in him and explained that he wanted to get away and clear his head for a while. Douglas reportedly liked another motorcycle that Dean owned, a Suzuki GSXR 750, and the pair agreed to trade the motorcycle with Douglas' 1994 black and maroon Holden Commodore sedan (**'the Commodore'**).⁹ The Commodore was distinctive, with a black bonnet, maroon body, Queensland licence plates and different wheels on the front compared with the rear.¹⁰
27. Douglas instructed his brother, Aaron 'Dasha' Brunt, to attend Dean's father's home to collect the motorcycle.¹¹ Aaron, and his partner, attended Dean's father's home, explained the trade that had occurred, and pushed the motorcycle back to his home and told Douglas where it was located.¹²
28. Douglas' brother, Jamie, visited Douglas and Aaron and observed Dean at the property with the Commodore. Jamie noted that Dean was wearing a black t-shirt, black shorts, black and blue cap and no shoes.¹³ Jamie recalled that when he saw the Commodore, it was *"in really good condition"*¹⁴ and had no dents or rust.
29. Dean drove to the home of another friend, Kintae Salter. Kintae told police that he and Dean had used 'ice' and alcohol together and were both substance-affected. Dean and Kintae drove to Dean's brother's home at Pritchard Street, Swan Hill. Dean told Kintae that he was leaving Swan Hill and wanted to see his brother, Steven Jenkins, before he left.
30. When the pair arrived at Steven's home, Kintae spoke to Steven and told him that Dean was outside and wanted to see him. Dean showed Steven his new car and told him that he was going to leave town, and left Steven's place shortly thereafter. Dean and Kintae drove to Debra's house, however she was not home, so the pair waited there for a while, before driving off.

⁹ CB, Audio-visual statement of Douglas Tarrant, undated, 68.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ CB, Statement of Aaron Brunt, 22 June 2017, 97.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ CB, Second statement of Jamie Tarrant, 21 April 2017, 159.

¹⁴ Ibid.

31. Later that date, Dean drove Kintae back to Neville's home. Kintae asked Neville to get into the car, which he did. Neville asked Dean where he got the Commodore, but Dean refused to say. Neville asked if he had traded the motorcycle for the Commodore. Neville was concerned that the Commodore was not worth \$12,000 and Dean cryptically replied that "*there was a bit of money that has got to change hands*".¹⁵
32. Dean wanted to obtain some 'ice' and as they were driving along, the group observed an associate, Shane Kirby, walking on the road. Dean pulled over and picked him up. Dean asked Shane if they could attend his home and use drugs together. Shane agreed and the group attended his home where they all injected 'ice' together. Shane recalled that Dean was pacing around the house and appeared agitated after using the drugs. The group left Shane's house about 30 minutes later.
33. Dean drove erratically and at speed around Swan Hill. Dean drove to visit another one of his friends, Tye Walsh, and his partner, Sharee. Tye recalled seeing Dean in the distinctive maroon and black Commodore, with Kintae, Neville, and Shane also in the vehicle. Neville spoke to Tye, advised that Dean was erratic and believed he was in a police chase. Dean did not stop driving until he reached Tye's house. At this point, Neville left the group and walked home.¹⁶
34. Tye reported that Dean was "*acting real paranoid*"¹⁷ and a few days' earlier, had shaved his eyebrows and head to disguise himself. Tye recalled that Dean would look out the window every time a car drove past, and he believed that there were some "*crooked cops in town*".¹⁸ Dean told Tye that he "*might live off the land out bush*" or "*visit a relative who had a train on this land or head north*".¹⁹ Dean allegedly told Tye that he was going to do "*some petrol runs*".²⁰
35. Dean left in the Commodore, with Kintae and Shane and drove to Kintae's home. Kintae's girlfriend, Eileen 'Effie' Atkinson was home at the time. Dean and Shane drove Kintae and

¹⁵ CB, Statement of Neville Johnson, 25 August 2017, 143.

¹⁶ CB, Statement of Sheree Mirabito, 6 July 2017, 183.

¹⁷ CB, Statement of Tye Walsh, 6 July 2017, 179.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 180.

²⁰ Ibid.

Effie to the Federal Hotel, just over the Victoria – New South Wales Border. Before Dean left, the Federal Hotel, Kintae withdrew \$150 cash from an ATM and gave it to Dean.²¹

36. Dean and Shane drove to the BP Service Station located on Campbell Street, Swan Hill, arriving at 11.23pm. Dean filled the Commodore with petrol while Shane attempted to withdraw money from an ATM, however the transaction was declined. Dean and Shane allegedly drove off without paying for the fuel.
37. Dean dropped Shane off at his home. While at Shane's house, Shane gave Dean some prescription medication (either quetiapine or diazepam) and \$25 or \$30 in cash. Dean left Shane's home in the Commodore.²²
38. In the early hours of 24 August 2016, Dean drove to Kintae's house, where Kintae was accompanied by Effie and their friend, Bruce Lea. Dean and the group consumed alcohol and played darts together. Kintae hid Dean's car keys as he believed Dean was substance affected and did not want him to drive. Dean eventually found his car keys and left in his Commodore at about 4.00am.²³
39. Dean then drove to Douglas' home. Douglas and his partner, Nicole, did not see Dean, however they identified the Commodore via its distinctive sound.²⁴ Dean loitered at Douglas' home for about 20 minutes, before driving off.
40. At 4.13am, Dean drove back to the BP Service Station on Campbell Street, Swan Hill, where he again filled the Commodore with fuel. He was cut off at \$40 worth of fuel, as the shop attendant recognised the vehicle from the earlier drive-off. This time, Dean attended the after-hours window and paid for the fuel.
41. On the morning of 24 August 2016, Douglas' friends advised him via text message that they had observed the Commodore bogged in mud on Dead Horse Lane, Swan Hill.²⁵ Douglas and his partner, Nicole, drove to the Commodore's location and observed Dean digging up mud from behind the front right wheel, in order to get the vehicle out. Douglas

²¹ CB, Second statement of Kintea Salter, 12 September 2017, 171.

²² CB, Statement of Shane Kirby, 8 November 2017, 177.

²³ CB, First statement of Kintea Salter, 26 September 2016, 167.

²⁴ CB, Statement of Aaron Brunt, 22 June 2017, 98.

²⁵ CB, Audio-visual statement of Douglas Tarrant, undated, 69.

assisted Dean to get the Commodore out of the mud, and Dean was able to drive away. Douglas last observed Dean driving down the end of Dead Horse Lane and turning right towards Sea Lake Road.²⁶

42. After assisting Dean with the Commodore, Douglas attended Tye's home and explained that he had helped Dean get the Commodore out of the mud. Douglas told Tye that police had attended his home as the Commodore was bearing plates that belonged to his girlfriend, Nicole, and the Commodore had been allegedly used in "*petrol runs*".²⁷
43. On 15 September 2016, Debra officially reported Dean missing to Victoria Police. She reported the last time she saw Dean was late-August 2016, which was unusual. He had not contacted her or any other family members. Dean did not access his bank accounts after 24 August 2016, and he did not own a mobile phone.
44. Police commenced a missing persons investigation which included extensive searches of the Swan Hill area and its surrounds, by Police Air Wing and uniform members. The local print and television media outlets ran stories highlighting his disappearance.
45. Local resident, Richard Kelly, leased a 485-acre property in Woorinen/Woorinen South, near the intersection of Barry Road and O'Connor Road, commonly referred to as O'Connor's Paddock. Richard worked at the property full-time, with the assistance of an employee. On 15 February 2017, Richard saw an article in the local newspaper about a missing person (Dean) and his Commodore. Richard recalled that he saw the Commodore in December 2016 during harvest season and thought it was being used by the local kids for "*bush bashing*" so he did not think it was anything sinister.²⁸
46. Richard attended the property and located the Commodore, which was actually on his neighbour's property. He called the police and explained that he believed he found the Commodore that was referenced in the newspaper. While waiting for police to attend,

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ CB, Statement of Tye Walsh, 6 July 2017, 180.

²⁸ CB, Statement of Richard Kelly, 16 February 2017, 79.

Richard also called his neighbour to explain that the Commodore was on his side of the fence.²⁹

47. When police attended the scene, they observed Dean's Commodore wedged on a mound of dirt, with items distributed inside the vehicle. Tree branches were placed around and under the rear driver's side wheel, which appeared to have been positioned that way to prop up the rear wheel. The Commodore was dirty and appeared to have been in that location for some time. The Commodore's fuel tank was empty, the headlights were switched to 'auto' mode, the windscreen wipers were on, and the speaker boxes in the boot were unsecured and the cable ties had been cut. A red t-shirt was located in the boot and underwear was located in the passenger side of the vehicle. The windshield had several cracks in a vertical line on the passenger side of the vehicle. There was no other major damage observed to the Commodore.
48. About 70 metres from the Commodore, police located human remains in a burrow, which measured 800 x 700 x 700 mm. The remains were in a hunched/foetal position, with the lower-right leg located about 40 metres away from the body. Once the remains were removed from the burrow, police observed two "*squared off edges*" around the burrow, forming a corner. There were no obvious signs of trauma or injury to the remains, which were later confirmed to be that of Dean Jenkins.

FURTHER POLICE INVESTIGATIONS

49. As there was no readily apparent cause of death, and various members of the Swan Hill community were speculating about how Dean died, police considered and investigated various leads, rumours and tip-offs. Some of Dean's friends and associates discussed Dean's erratic behaviour in the lead-up to his disappearance and an alleged intention he expressed to leave town. These are noted in further detail below.

Stolen Harley Davidson motorcycle

50. Police investigated rumours that Dean allegedly stole a Harley Davidson motorcycle from an outlaw motorcycle gang (OMCG) member and that his disappearance was related to

²⁹ Ibid, 80.

same. Police discovered that Dean did own a Harley Davidson motorcycle, however this was purchased more than a year prior to his passing.

51. The Harley Davidson was purchased by a man named Greg, from a dealership in Echuca. Greg opined that the Harley Davidson may have been related to an OMCG. In mid-2016, Greg arranged to give the Harley Davidson to his carer's brother, Alan 'Wedge' Maher. The arrangement was that Wedge would clean up the bike, Greg would appoint Wedge as his official carer, and Greg would obtain the \$800 fortnightly Centrelink carer payment from Wedge.
52. The day after Wedge obtained the Harley Davidson, he told Greg that he sold the Harley Davidson the night before to Dean. Wedge alleged that he traded the Harley Davidson for \$1,000 worth of 'ice' with Dean. Greg did not know Dean personally and never met him, only knew of him.
53. Police were unable to substantiate any claims that Dean's death was caused by or was related to the Harley Davidson and associated trades that occurred. Wedge was found deceased on 21 August 2016 and therefore this avenue of investigation was unable to be explored further.

Assault allegation against Dean

54. Police obtained information to suggest that Dean was angry at Effie (Kintae's partner) for providing a statement to police regarding an alleged assault. Dean was charged with an alleged assault and Kintae reportedly had a fight with Dean due to Effie coming forward and making a statement against Dean. Both Kintae and Dean were charged with threaten to inflict serious injury.
55. Another rumour surfaced alleging that Dean was at Douglas' house in the company of Nicole, Kintae, Effie and Ian 'Bruv' Day, another associate of theirs. Dean and Effie allegedly had an argument regarding Effie's statement to police, Dean reportedly assaulted Effie, Kintae intervened to protect Effie, and Ian used a baseball bat to hit Dean over the head, causing his death.

56. Some rumours suggested that Ian was involved in Dean's death, and he used a variety of weapons in relation to the death including, a screwdriver to the neck, a firearm to the head and a knife to the back of Dean's head. After Dean's passing, he was allegedly rolled up in a piece of carpet and placed in the boot of his Commodore. The group (Kintae, Ian, Douglas, Nicole and Effie) allegedly drove Dean's body to Woorinen where they buried it.
57. An alternative rumour suggested that after his murder, Dean and the Commodore were driven to a different property with a cool room, where Dean was stored for about six months, before being moved to Woorinen just prior to his discovery in 2017.
58. Police interrogated the phone records of the group who were allegedly involved and there was no evidence located to support a theory that the group organised to be picked up from the paddock where Dean's body was found, or in the Woorinen area in general.
59. Police executed several search warrants, including one at Douglas' Swan Hill home. Nine swabs were obtained from the bathroom and hallway which may have included the presence of blood. During the search, police were advised that some carpet from Douglas' house had been removed, and they were advised that this carpet had been removed due to being old and in poor condition. Police tracked down the location of the removed carpet and seized it for further evidence.
60. Police arrested Douglas, obtained a sample of his DNA and interviewed him in connection with Dean's disappearance. Police also interviewed Ian and obtained a sample of his DNA. Ian and Douglas' DNA samples were compared with all of the items recovered from the paddock, as well as the other items seized under search warrants, and no matches were found.

Accident/misadventure

61. Police also considered the possibility that Dean had an accident on or after 24 August 2016 or was the victim of misadventure, particularly in the context of his recent substance abuse. Police obtained the weather records for 24 and 25 August 2016 and noted that at 11.00pm on 24 August 2016, the temperature was 4.6 degrees Celsius. At 6.00am on 25 August 2016, the temperature dropped to 1.1 degrees Celsius.

62. Police opined that they could not exclude the possibility that Dean may have been experiencing a drug-induced psychosis that resulted in him becoming stranded in the paddock. Due to the cold temperatures, it was possible that Dean succumbed to the elements whilst stranded in the paddock, noting the low temperatures and Dean's lack of access to a mobile phone. If he was severely substance-affected, Dean may not have appreciated the gravity of his situation or known how to call for help.

Police conclusion about cause and circumstances of death

63. Police noted that there was no physical evidence or DNA evidence to support an allegation that Dean was murdered. Police also noted that many of the rumours about Dean's death were circulated by his friends and associates and may have been no more than mere speculation in a small country town where most people know one another. Police therefore could not exclude the possibility that Dean had an accident and/or was substance-affected and unable to obtain assistance for himself.

FINDING AND CONCLUSION

64. Having investigated the death of Dean Jenkins and having held an inquest on 14 May 2025, I make the following findings, pursuant to section 67(1) of the Act:
- a) the identity of the deceased was Dean Jenkins, born 28 July 1983;
 - b) the death occurred between 24 August 2016 and 15 February 2017 at O'Connor Road, Woorinen, Victoria, 3589;
 - c) the cause of death was *unascertained*; and
 - d) the death occurred in the circumstances described above.
65. Having considered all of the available evidence, I am unable to determine the precise circumstances of Dean's passing. There are multiple possibilities, and I cannot exclude any option.
66. Dean was known to use illicit substances and was noted to be paranoid and acting erratically prior to his disappearance. He told several associates that he was planning to

leave town and believed that police or ‘bikies’ were looking for him. Whilst in this intoxicated state, Dean may have had an accident, such as getting his car stuck in a paddock, then tripped and fell into a burrow and was rendered unconscious.

67. I note that the forensic pathologist suggested that the position of the remains was suspicious, suggested foul play, and the remains appeared to have been placed in the burrow deliberately. Upon reviewing the scene photos, the position of the remains was unusual and could be consistent with someone placing the body there. It could also be consistent with Dean tripping and falling into the burrow. The remains did not show any injuries or trauma, however I note the remains were largely skeletonised and the cause of death was unascertained, so I cannot *completely* exclude foul play.
68. Police have conducted a thorough investigation and have been unable to exclude the possibility that Dean died as a result of an accident or misadventure. Police interviewed all of Dean’s associates and friends, particularly those who had contact with him prior to his disappearance. Police executed search warrants and took DNA samples to compare with samples taken at the scene where Dean’s remains were located. Police were unable to find any evidence to suggest that anyone else was present in the paddock with Dean. Police opined that homicide was unlikely, given the absence of trauma or injuries to the body and were unable to corroborate any of the rumours circulating in Swan Hill.
69. Therefore, it is possible that Dean’s death was the result of accident, misadventure or homicide. I cannot exclude or confirm any of these possibilities with certainty, and unfortunately the precise cause and circumstances of his death cannot be determined.
70. In reaching this conclusion, I note that if new facts and circumstances become available in the future, section 77 of the Act allows any person to apply to the Court for an order that some or all of these findings be set aside. Any such application would be assessed on its merits at that time.

I convey my sincere condolences to Dean’s family for their loss.

Pursuant to section 73(1B) of the Act, I order that this finding be published on the Coroners Court of Victoria website in accordance with the rules.

I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

Debra Cummings, Senior Next of Kin

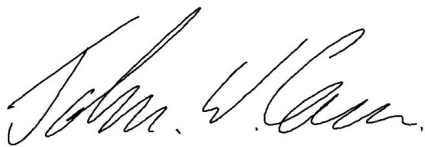
Steven Jenkins

Kaley Nicholson

Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal

Detective Senior Constable Sarah Kaye, Coronial Investigator

Signature:



Judge John Cain
State Coroner
Date: 14 May 2025

NOTE: Under section 83 of the *Coroners Act 2008* ('the Act'), a person with sufficient interest in an investigation may appeal to the Trial Division of the Supreme Court against the findings of a coroner in respect of a death after an inquest. An appeal must be made within 6 months after the day on which the determination is made, unless the Supreme Court grants leave to appeal out of time under section 86 of the Act.
