

# The New York Times

## ***‘Coloured Lives Matter’: A South African Police Shooting Like No Other***

*He was a young man from the projects gunned down by officers near his home. But race is complicated in South Africa, and so is his story.*



*“They shot Lockies!” The funeral for Nathaniel Julies in Eldorado Park, South Africa.*

**By Lynsey Chutel**  
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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — The deadly encounter between the police and a young man from the projects, set off public outrage with all the familiar scenes: shrines of flowers and stuffed animals, clouds of tear gas and barrages of rocks aimed at officers in riot gear, and impassioned slogans.

“Say His Name” read one poster.

“Coloured Lives Matter,” said another.

This police killing occurred not in Minneapolis or Ferguson or Cleveland but in South Africa, where the anger and distrust of law enforcement authorities mirror that in communities across the world, but the geography of racial tension is more complex than white vs. Black.

The young man who was shot last month, 16-year-old Nathaniel Julies, was of mixed heritage, or, as it is still known, colored, a vestige of apartheid-era South Africa's racial classification. Two of the three officers arrested in the case are also colored, and one is Black.

When Nathaniel's mother, Bridget Harris, saw first his body, she said, she was shocked by the gunshot wounds.

"We couldn't count," she said. "It's too many."

Death at the hands of the police in South Africa is hardly uncommon — [by one estimate](#), each day a South African dies in a police action. But this particular shooting in Johannesburg unleashed passionate protests that commanded an unusual degree of attention, inside South Africa and out. And the explanation, at least in part, is that this was no ordinary young man who was killed.

Nathaniel was seriously disabled by Down syndrome, and barely able to form complete sentences. A familiar figure in his Soweto neighborhood, Eldorado Park, he was often seen hanging out in local stores in the hope someone might buy him his favorite cookie, or on the dance floor with his signature moves. He was known as Lockies, and many in the neighborhood made a point of looking out for him.

Much remains unknown about what happened the evening he was killed next to a broken-down delivery van within sight of his family home.



*Nathaniel's mother, Bridget Harris, with her partner, Clint Smith.*

The authorities initially tried to suggest that Nathaniel had been shot during an exchange of gunfire between police officers and gang members. But within days of the killing, they charged the three officers.

Two of them, Simon Ndyalvane, a sergeant known in the community as Scorpion, and Caylene Whiteboy, a constable, were said to have been at the scene of shooting, and face charges of murder and obstruction of justice. They are also accused of attempting to discard evidence, said a spokeswoman for the prosecution, Phindi Mjonondwane. The third officer, Detective Sgt. Foster Netshiongolo, faces charges of accessory to murder and obstruction of justice.

Nathaniel's family believes that he may have been shot when the officers tried to question him about something and could not understand why he was unable to answer.

On the evening of Wednesday, August 26, when he was killed, Nathaniel's family had just finished dinner when he slipped out, apparently in search of the chocolate-chip cookies sold at a nearby store. He gave half his meal to the family's dogs so he could finish faster, recalls Ms. Harris's partner, Clint Smith.

Nathaniel was a frequent visitor to the store.

"He was always coming here in the morning, afternoon, evening, standing here," said Mia Ripon, the Bangladeshi immigrant who owns it. "Sometimes people would give him one rand or two rand for that biscuit he liked."

That evening, with a coronavirus curfew approaching, Mr. Ripon told Nathaniel to go home. But he never made it. Around 9 p.m., the store owner heard a bang. So did Ms. Harris and Mr. Smith. Then the cries of disbelief began.

"They shot Lockies!" neighbors shouted.



*Mourners near the procession carrying the young man's body the day of his funeral.*

The officers are believed to have quickly driven the young man away, dropping him off at a hospital. But no one told the family where he was. When Ms. Harris heard that the

hospital was treating a gunshot victim, she rushed over and saw a figure covered by a sheet.

Disbelief gripped her when she recognized the sandals protruding out.

“I was screaming the whole hospital down,” she said. “How can it be Nathaniel out of everybody? I saw the sandals but I still felt, no, it’s not my baby.”

In many parts of the United States and elsewhere, the Black Lives Matter movement has spurred fresh scrutiny of race relations, as protesters demand an end to what they see as pervasive police brutality, usually dispensed by white officers against people of color.

In South Africa, too, citizens have long denounced police brutality. Under cover of the pandemic lockdowns, critics say, some officers are acting with still more impunity.

But the narrative here is more tangled.

In South Africa, a majority-Black police force is accused of abusing a majority-Black citizenry. The police station at the center of Nathaniel Julies’ case, for example, is staffed overwhelmingly by Black and colored police officers. But it has been the subject of 80 complaints of brutality from 2012 to 2019, 10 of them involving fatalities, according to Viewfinder, an investigative journalism project that collects data on police killings.

South Africans, especially those old enough to remember the apartheid days, when the country was ruthlessly ruled by a white government, may never look kindly at the police.

Police departments were once an extension of the apartheid state, enforcing its rules, assassinating political leaders and encouraging violence to keep townships destabilized. For nonwhite South Africans, the police were a source of terror, not protection. And Black policemen were seen as traitors.



*The shooting set off angry protests, including at the Eldorado Park police station.*

Apartheid excelled at pitting one group against another, and the legacy of that is still playing out today in communities like the predominantly colored one Nathaniel lived in.

Under segregationist rule, colored people enjoyed advantages, however meager, over Black people, like slightly better education for their children and housing with plumbing in some areas. They were not considered Black under the apartheid regime, and many still reject being identified as Black today, embracing being colored as a culture and an identity.

Government-mandated segregation may be gone, but communities like Eldorado Park remain largely the same in makeup.

The police have made efforts to to move on from the brutality of the apartheid era. In a bid at reform, the South African government began rebranding the department when apartheid came to an end, in 1994. It is now called the South African Police Service, with the word “Service” added.

But critics say, this has not changed the culture of the police force. The new generation of officers are regarded with suspicion amid allegations of rampant corruption. And police killings remain so common that it is rare when a death gets people to the streets. But earlier this year, demonstrations broke out after police and soldiers were accused of killing another man during the pandemic lockdown.

“I think the South African state, and South African society, are really at a watershed moment this year in the response and reckoning to the impunity, violence and brutality in the police service,” said Daneel Knoetze, who heads Viewfinder, the journalism project that tracks police killings.

The authorities have pledged that there will be justice in the killing of Nathaniel Julies.

“We will spare nobody,” said the police minister, Bheki Cele, who in 2009, rebutted reports that he had encouraged a so-called shoot to kill policy. “Whoever has committed a crime will have to face the law.”



*Police shootings are so common in South Africa that they are often greeted with resignation, but the Julies case has touched a nerve.*

When community members marched to demand answers over Mr. Julies' death, the police moved aggressively to disperse them. Protesters then barricaded streets and burned tires.

President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed distress at television images of the violence beamed across the country, describing Eldorado Park as "a community that deserves better." But he included a reprimand.

"While communities have a right to express dissent, anger should not spill over into action that could worsen the trauma already experienced by citizens," Mr. Ramaphosa said. "Justice can only prevail if community workers work with our criminal justice system to address alleged injustice or abuse."

Since the shooting, there has been a steady stream of visitors to the freshly painted, four-room, apartheid-era home where Ms. Harris is raising her seven remaining children.

"I feel like I'm living it all over again," said Ms. Harris.

She and Mr. Smith wear T-shirts with Mr. Julies' face on it. His visage also beams down at them from a large portrait donated by demonstrators.

Community members have turned out for the accused officers' court appearances. One recent day, spectators called out to Officer Whiteboy, who is colored, urging her to turn against her fellow officers.

"Turn state witness, girl," said one.

"Speak up, we'll support you," shouted another.

But many are skeptical that they will ever see justice — in this case, or in their daily lives.

"They are supposed to be protecting us, but they are killing us," said Leonie Nero, a mother of two who lives near Mr. Julies' home. "They are targeting innocent children. Where should our children play?"