

25 Truths About the Death of Young Nahel in France

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A 17-year-old teenager was killed by a police officer during a traffic stop, sparking strong emotions in French society.

1. At 8 a.m. on June 27, 2023, in Nanterre, near Paris, two police officers stopped a car occupied by three people, all minors, following a refusal to stop. The driver was a 17-year-old teenager called Nahel. When the car started up again, one of the police officers fired at point-blank range, killing the youngster, the only child of a single-parent family. The video available on social networks clearly shows that the car posed no danger to the two police officers.

2. Unaware of the existence of the video, the two police officers stated that the car ran into them and that they had been obliged to use their firearms to protect their lives. This was clearly a lie. Alain Bauer, Professor of Criminology at the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers and a recognized specialist in training police officers and gendarmes, insisted: "The false version, totally contradicted by the images, ruins the whole edifice. It's a lie. The car didn't run him over. The car didn't run into him." He also denounced "the few rotten, corrupt police officers and black sheep of the profession [...] who cast opprobrium on all those who respect law and order and are defenders of freedoms". Without the video, the police officers' false version would have prevailed, and the person responsible for the teenager's death would never have been brought to justice.

3. Relaying the false police version, the media were quick to portray the teenager as a dangerous, multi-recidivist delinquent. In reality, young Nahel had no criminal record. The Nanterre public prosecutor's office even opened an investigation against the driver for "refusal to obey orders and attempted voluntary manslaughter of a public official". This decision was greeted with general incomprehension, as the images formally refute the police version. What's more, the death of the driver automatically puts an end to all legal proceedings. The public prosecutor's office also opened an investigation against the police officer for "voluntary manslaughter by a public official". He was brought before a judge and

remanded in custody at the Santé prison.

4. The officer's lawyer, Maître Laurent-Franck Liénard, emphasized the exceptional nature of the detention: "In my 31-year career of defending cases involving the use of weapons, I have never had a client taken into custody after being brought before a judge". This statement illustrates the reality of police impunity, and reinforces the widespread feeling in French society that justice protects police officers who commit crimes. Maître Jean-Pierre Mignard, a lawyer representing victims of police violence, is categorical on this point: "All professions have a genetic code: that of the police is impunity".

5. Camille Chaize, spokeswoman for the French Ministry of the Interior, dismissed the controversy surrounding the victim's alleged criminal record, which the police and the media put forward to justify the officer's action. Asked about this, she replied: "That's not the point of the debate, it doesn't make sense to think that way, regardless of whether or not he was known to the police. [...] But it's true that some police sources [...] put forward criminal records, or even entries in the handrail, which is infra-judicial, which is not the criminal record, but all that doesn't make sense, doesn't matter".

6. The victim's family lawyer, Maître Yassine Bouzrou, announced that he had filed a complaint against the two police officers, one for voluntary manslaughter and the other for complicity in voluntary manslaughter. He explained in the following terms: "There is no doubt about his intention to cause death, since it is clear from the soundtrack of the video that he announced before firing: 'I'm going to put a bullet in your head'. The complaint will also target his colleague for complicity in voluntary manslaughter, who appears to be ordering his colleague to fire by saying 'shoot him' just before the shot is fired".

7. The testimony of the passenger sitting next to Nahel is incriminatory. He recounted the facts in detail: "The first policeman asked Nahel to roll down his window, which Nahel did. He told him: 'Turn off the engine or I'll shoot you'. He gave him the first blow with his rifle butt. Then the second policeman came along and also hit him with the rifle butt, and positioned himself at windshield level opposite Nahel. From there, the first policeman, who was at window level, pointed a gun at him and said: 'Don't move or I'll put a bullet in your head'. The second policeman said, 'Shoot him'. The first policeman gives him another shot, with the butt of his gun. The car has an automatic gearbox. The car wasn't in 'park'. When he received the third rifle butt, his foot left the brake pedal and the car moved forward. And the second policeman, who was at windshield level, fired. Then his foot hit the gas pedal. I saw him in agony, shaking. We hit a barrier. I got scared and got out of the car. I ran away. I thought they might even shoot me. So, I ran".

8. The rear passenger, aged 14, also gave evidence. He was on his way to college to pass the brevet middle-school exam and came across Nahel, who offered him a lift. "The police officers pointed their guns at Nahel" who took "about three" blows, tried to "protect his head". One policeman claimed "he was going to put one in his head". Nahel then "let go of the brake probably out of panic, trying to protect himself. The car drove off on its own. It was an automatic. And the policeman told his colleague to shoot. And the gun went off".

9. French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the police officer's action in a public statement: "I want to express the emotion of the entire nation, and tell his family of the nation's affection [...]. We have a teenager who has been killed, it's inexplicable, inexcusable". For his part, Gérard Darmanin, Minister of the Interior, pointed to "extremely shocking images".

10. February 2017, François Hollande's Socialist government pushed through the Public Security Law authorizing police to use their firearms in cases of refusal to obey. Paragraph 4 stipulates that officers may use their weapons "when they are unable to immobilize, other than by the use of weapons, vehicles, boats or other means of transport, whose drivers do not obey the order to stop and whose occupants are likely to perpetrate, in their flight, harm to their lives or physical integrity or those of others". The Human Rights League and numerous members of parliament denounced the law as a "license to kill", calling for its repeal. Maître Liénard himself publicly opposed the law: "If we start telling police officers they can shoot at a fleeing car, we'll have more shootings, more injuries and more police convictions".

11. Since 2017, the number of people who have lost their lives as a result of refusal to yield has risen sharply. From 17 people between 2002 and 2017, an average of 0.88 people per year, it has risen to 13 people for the year 2022, some of whom were mere passengers. The victims have two main characteristics: they are mostly young, even very young, and racialized. By way of comparison, in Germany, there has been only one death as a result of a refusal to stop in ten years.

12. On June 30, 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights denounced the structural racism present within France's police and gendarmerie forces. Its spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani appealed to the authorities: "Now is the time for the country to seriously address the deep-rooted problems of racism and racial discrimination among law enforcement officers". A few days later, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination denounced "the murder of Nahel M., 17, of North African origin, by a police officer in France" and expressed its "deep concern at the persistent practice of racial profiling, combined with the excessive use of force in law enforcement, in particular by the police, against members of minority groups, notably of African and Arab origin, which frequently results in recurrent killings, disproportionately, with virtual impunity".

13. Questioned on this subject, Laurent Nuñez, Prefect of the Paris police, denied the reality of the situation: "There is no racism in the police". Yet even the President of the Republic has acknowledged the existence of persistent discriminatory practices: "Today, when you have a skin color that is not white, you are much more controlled [...]. You're identified as a problem factor, and that's unbearable".

14. According to various studies, the majority of police and military personnel vote for the far right. For example, according to the Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences-Po (Cevipof), the Ipsos polling institute and the Fondation Jean Jaurès, 60% of police and military personnel voted for Marine Le Pen in 2022. In 2017, 67% of active police officers voted for the far-right candidate.

15. A study carried out in 2017 by Jacques Toubon, Defender of Rights and former Minister of Justice under Jacques Chirac, illustrates the racist prejudices present within the police force and the police mistreatment of young people from working-class neighborhoods. Individuals perceived as Black or Arab are "20 times more likely than others to be stopped" by the police. The Defender of Rights points out that 40% of these people claim to have been on a first-name basis, 21% insulted and 20% brutalized during their last stop. Another study by the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) points out that "the behavior of the French police [...] can be likened to racial profiling". Christian Vigouroux, deontologist at the French Ministry of the Interior, even submitted a 160-page report in 2021 on

“combating discrimination within the security forces”, formulating 54 proposals that have gone unheeded.

16. According to international law, “racial discrimination is a particularly odious form of discrimination and, in view of its dangerous consequences, requires special vigilance and a vigorous reaction on the part of the authorities”. Article 26 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that “all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.

17. According to Amnesty International (AI), “in France, the practice of identity checks is widespread, deeply embedded in police action, to the extent that it fosters systemic discrimination”. According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, systemic discrimination “can be understood as a set of predominant legal rules, policies, practices or cultural attitudes in the public or private sector that create relative disadvantages for some groups, and privileges for others”. AI adds that “the practice of discriminatory identity checks is known and amply documented”, denounces its “scale” and stresses “its devastating effects on victims, including children sometimes as young as twelve”.

18. The French Supreme Court (Cour de cassation), the highest court in the French legal system, recognized the existence of this practice in a 2016 ruling, and stressed that “facial” identity checks constituted a serious misconduct for which the State is liable.

19. Jean Hossam Botros Messiha, far-right activist, born in Egypt and naturalized in France at the age of 20, still considered an immigrant by INSEE, spokesman for Éric Zemmour during the 2022 presidential campaign, proponent of the racist “grand remplacement” theory, who declares that immigration – from which he benefited at the age of 8 – today constitutes a “historic existential threat to France”, has opened an online kitty in support of the police officer under investigation for voluntary manslaughter. In the space of a few days, the “kitty of shame”, as it was dubbed by many observers, raised 1.6 million euros with more than 76,000 donors, making a millionaire of a man responsible for the death of a teenager, arousing the legitimate anger of the family and the indignation of public opinion.

20. Nahel’s death triggered an explosion of anger across France, the political dimension of which was downplayed by the authorities, who preferred to see these urban revolts as nothing more than a destructive impulse. On the side of the rioters, the feeling reigns that only violence can make their voices heard. Numerous businesses and public buildings, mainly in working-class neighborhoods, were ransacked by young people, some as young as twelve. Nearly 12,000 cars were burned and 2,500 public buildings damaged, including over 250 police stations and more than 150 schools. The personal home of the mayor of La Häy-les-Roses was even attacked with a ram car while his family was inside.

21. The state’s response to social protest has been uniquely authoritarian and repressive, with the mobilization of 45,000 law enforcement officers, including elite corps such as the GIGN, RAID and BRI. In Marseille, a 27-year-old father lost his life following a “probable” flash-ball shot, according to the public prosecutor’s office. In Meurthe-et-Moselle, a young man in his twenties is in a coma after being shot in the head by police. According to the judicial authorities, there is no evidence to suggest that these two people were involved in

the riots. Both are of North African origin. Nearly 3,500 people were arrested, and nearly 60% of them had no criminal record, according to Gérald Darmanin. According to the Minister of the Interior, 90% of those arrested were French. At his Senate hearing, Gérald Darmanin dismissed the identity-related explanation: “I looked around the police stations. Yes, there are people who apparently could be from an immigrant background. But there were a lot of Kevin’s and Mattéo’s”.

22. Justice, for its part, was swift and merciless. For example, a 28-year-old man was sentenced to 10 months’ imprisonment with a committal order for stealing a can of Red Bull worth 1.15 euros. His lawyer, Camille Bal, commented: “The main actors in the violence are the ones who were largely absent from yesterday’s hearings. Those who were picked up by the police were the ones who appeared after the crime, after the store had been targeted by the thugs. My client came into the Monoprix in the dark, took a can of Redbull, went out and was plucked like a rose”. For Maître Camille Vannier, who took part in the collective defense system, “justice is completely instrumentalized” by political power. She points out that the judges blindly follow the requisitions: “It’s very worrying from the point of view of the independence of the judiciary. Warrant of committal, warrant of committal, warrant of committal... for minor offences”. Maître Elsa Marcel also expresses her astonishment: “The sentences are extremely harsh, the procedures sloppy, there are many scenarios where people are not recognized, the arrest reports are extremely vague, it’s political justice”.

23. On June 30, 2023, the two main police unions, Alliance Police Nationale and UNSA Police, published a communiqué of rare violence, confirming all the accusations of racism levelled at the police force. Protesters from working-class neighborhoods are animalized and described as “savage hordes” and “pests” who must be fought, calling for “all means” to be used to this end. The press release also directly threatens the government with sedition in barely veiled terms, something unprecedented for a republican police force whose mission is to obey the executive and uphold the law: “For these reasons, Alliance Police Nationale and UNSA Police will assume their responsibilities and warn the government right now that, in the end, we will be in action, and without concrete measures for the legal protection of police officers, an appropriate penal response and the provision of substantial resources, police officers will judge the level of consideration shown. Today, police officers are in combat because we are at war. Tomorrow, we will be in resistance, and the government will have to realize this”. In another unprecedented move, UNSA Education publicly condemned the communiqué, denouncing the words as “disturbing and unbearable”. As for the government, it has taken no action against the authors of this statement.

24. Young Nahel’s death was the spark that ignited a social powder keg in neighborhoods abandoned by the Republic. In addition to the systemic racism suffered mainly by people of immigrant origin (47% of people from sub-Saharan Africa and 30% of people from the Maghreb are victims), disadvantaged populations are neglected by the public authorities. The figures speak for themselves: 7.5% of the French population (5.5 million inhabitants) live in the suburbs. Unemployment in these areas is twice the national average. Half of young people are unemployed. Nearly 40% of residents have no qualifications, compared with a national average of 20%. There are almost half as many libraries and three times fewer sports facilities in working-class neighborhoods as in the rest of the country. The poverty rate is three times higher than in the rest of the country (42% vs. 14.9%). As a reminder, there are 9 million poor people in France, including 3 million children. While the national average is 400 doctors per 100,000 inhabitants, there are only 250 in working-class neighborhoods. 40% of working-class neighborhoods have no crèches, while single-parent

families are twice as numerous as in the rest of the country (20%). Contrary to popular belief, social transfers are lower in these areas: 6,100 euros per inhabitant per year, compared with the national average of 6,800 euros. What's more, far from being on life support, these neighborhoods contribute more to the national effort than the rest of the country. For example, Seine-Saint-Denis is the third-poorest department in France (and the first in France) out of a total of 101 departments, and the one that receives the least social protection per inhabitant, despite being the eighth-largest contributor to the country's public finances. For example, Seine-Saint-Denis has 1,100 hospital civil servants per 100,000 inhabitants, compared with an average of 1,800 for the rest of the country. Governments pay little heed to the plight of these impoverished populations, as they wield very little political or electoral power. In fact, 48% of people living in working-class neighborhoods either did not vote or abstained from voting in the last presidential elections.

25. Urgent action is needed by politicians in general and the government in particular:

- The 2017 Public Safety Act must be suspended pending its repeal. This will protect both citizens and police officers by returning to the status quo ante, which sets a strict framework for the use of firearms.
- It is imperative that the denial within the police force, government authorities and political leaders about the structural racism present in the police force cease.
- It is essential that impunity for police officers guilty of crimes and misdemeanors be brought to an end, and that they be punished in an exemplary fashion, commensurate with the crime committed. Racist police officers, and more generally those who do not respect the ethics and code of conduct of the profession, must be excluded from the corps of peacekeepers.
- Cases of police violence must be systematically dismissed to guarantee the serenity of the debates - a demand made by the Magistrate's Union (Syndicat de la Magistrature) - given the close links between the public prosecutor's office and the forces of law and order.
- A "Justice and Truth" commission, made up of independent members, must be set up to analyze all cases of police violence and provide a response to victims and their families.
- The General Inspectorate of the National Police (IGPN), which has lost all credibility due to the scarcity of sanctions against officers responsible for crimes and offenses, needs to be reformed and staffed by independent individuals unconnected with the forces of law and order.
- Police officers and gendarmes must be equipped with pedestrian cameras, which will provide guarantees for both officers and the public, and improve the quality of checks.
- Peacekeepers should issue a receipt for each check to reduce discrimination.
- The State must review its doctrine, practices and methods, with a return to a policy based on prevention rather than repression. For example, community policing, praised by all social players for its effectiveness and ability to forge links with young people, must be re-established, particularly in working-class neighborhoods.
- It is essential to improve the salaries of police officers and offer them better working conditions, in order to facilitate their work and make the profession more attractive.
- Candidates for the peacekeeper competitive examination must undergo a more

rigorous selection process, to weed out those who are not suited to the profession. In the same way, the police must ensure the integration of immigrants into their ranks by offering them dignified working conditions, free from any form of discrimination.

- The training process must also be thoroughly revised, improved and extended over a much longer period, as the profession has long been demanding (psychological tests, stress tolerance test, respect for the values of the republic, etc.).
- The government must provide a political, economic and social response to the issue of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, by implementing ambitious affirmative action in favor of people from working-class neighborhoods, whose suffering has been ignored by public authorities for far too long.

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Featured image: Cars burn in the aftermath of clashes between protesters and police following the death of Nahel, a 17-year-old teenager killed by a French police in Nanterre during a traffic stop, in Toulouse, France, June 28, 2023. (Source: TIMOTHEE FORGET/VIA REUTERS)

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