



PsySSA condemns the use of force by security personnel during the COVID-19 lockdown

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PsySSA is the professional body representing psychology professionals in South Africa. PsySSA has, since its inception, been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA is committed to the transformation and development of South African Psychology to serve the needs and interests of all South Africa's people. PsySSA advances psychology as a science, profession and as a means of promoting human well-being (<https://www.psyssa.com>).

Position Statement

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) supports government's efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic, but has grave concerns about the reports of heavy-handed police and security force tactics and associated brutalities during this time. These are extremely disturbing as they compromise confidence in national leadership, and disrupt the social contract between citizens and government, in so far as they jeopardise civil liberties in an already precarious social moment. The death of Mr Colins Khosa, allegedly at the hands of soldiers from the South African National Defence Force, is one of a number of distressing events that lead us to question the behaviour, training and supervision of such personnel.

We are deeply troubled by such reports of inappropriate security personnel actions, in the same way as we are disturbed by the recent death of unarmed George Floyd at the hands of police officers in the United States of America. PsySSA takes this opportunity to call for swift action against all security personnel who breach their given mandates to protect and serve the citizenry, by utilising unwarranted force and brutality. We also note the relationship between brutality and existing forms of marginalisation, including that such actions are being directed at racialised minorities, women, the poor, and the psychologically vulnerable. We call on all citizens to stand in solidarity against such actions, both nationally and internationally.

In addition to the direct physical and psychological harm to citizens, the use of excessive force by security personnel during lockdown alienates society and leads to a distrust in government's prevention efforts, which can ultimately be counter-productive in fighting the pandemic. On 31 May 2020, the television programme Carte Blanche reported on the arrest and six-week detention in police custody of a 55-year old mentally ill woman in the Eastern Cape. According to her son, the woman had insufficient understanding of lockdown regulations and, as a result, wandered outdoors where she was allegedly beaten and arrested.

The need for immediate and thorough investigation of the numerous allegations of security personnel brutality in our country during the lockdown cannot be sufficiently emphasised. In addition, PsySSA calls on government to ensure that police and security force officials are properly trained to interact with the mentally ill and other marginalised groups. The use of force on such individuals is inexcusable and a gross violation of human rights.

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