



The Real Baltimore Crisis

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On Monday, April 27, 2015, Baltimore burned. Across the country Americans were glued to television screens watching lines of police officers in full riot gear advance on crowds of protestors, as rocks sailed toward them. Images of young Baltimoreans using the rooftops of cop cars as trampolines, smashing in the windows, and lighting them aflame evoked a city at war with its own law enforcement. But in my field research I've seen a different crisis that predates – and is sure to post-date – the current troubles.

Unseen Baltimore

Much was left out of recent television coverage. Beyond the rocks, fire and tear-gas, high school students in Baltimore were stranded far from home when public transportation halted. Parents came to pull their kids out of the chaos. Men and women carried toilet paper out of a drugstore on their backs. Religious leaders stepped in to protect local businesses. Such omitted images tell a story not about war between civilians and police, but about deeply impoverished families mired in a city largely ignored and invisible to outsiders save a passing glimpse from a speeding Amtrak window. Once a bustling metropolis, Baltimore was America's sixth largest city in 1960, but it has lost a third of its population – and almost half of its white denizens.

The events of late April unfolded in some of the most marginalized neighborhoods in the country. Just north of Mondawmin is a community called Park Heights where a car was set on fire during the violence. I spent over a year in that area studying poverty, housing, and crime, and came to be intimately involved with residents as they welcomed me into their homes to eat meals, help with chores, and celebrate holidays. I accompanied families to find homes, attended church with them, and saw loved ones buried. For hours on end, I sat on homeowners' porches, regaled with stories of the well-kept, tree-lined streets they found when they first moved in.

Like many neighborhoods across the country, Park Heights reflects the legacy of policies that confined black residents to poor areas. After the Great Depression, federally backed mortgages made it easy for whites to buy homes, but nearly impossible for blacks. Banks refused to lend to blacks in "redlined" white neighborhoods, even as white neighborhood associations used restrictive covenants to keep blacks out. In the 1960s, real-estate agents "busted" into Park Heights, stoking racial fears to flip the white-owned homes on the block house by house. As white families fled, Park Heights was transformed from 95 percent white and predominantly Jewish in 1965 to an overwhelmingly black neighborhood by 1975. Poverty took hold, and by now one out of every five houses is empty. Streets are now lined with gaping holes.

Residents left in these communities face unimaginable poverty and violence. Inequality within Baltimore is stark. Life expectancy for residents of Park Heights is 15 years lower than in the white neighborhood of Roland Park, where people live to the ripe age of 84. One in four Park Heights residents is poor. Even though crime has drastically declined across the country, Baltimore remains one of the most dangerous U.S. cities. The day
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after the recent uprising, a man was murdered in an unrelated incident in Park Heights, Baltimore's 69th this year.

Before and After the Flare-Up

On Tuesday morning April 28, as the fires cooled to ash, West Baltimore residents cleaned up their streets. Four hundred miles north, I lectured to a class of 45 Harvard undergraduates in a building that is, quite literally, an ivory tower. Among my students were an Olympic athlete, the grandchild of a Nobel Prize laureate, another of a billionaire. As we discussed Baltimore, their faces registered shock. The problems of poverty and violence facing cities like Baltimore remain invisible to so many Americans.

The media narrative hyping civilian-cop clashes obscures both the economic and historical forces that set the stage for this conflict and the lived realities in these neighborhoods. In the time I spent in Park Heights, I saw frustrated residents confront violence in their communities daily, where the police are not always there when needed and often make problems worse. After being stopped three times on the way to work, David, 23, quit his fast food job in a predominantly white area of Baltimore. The police regularly stopped Ricky, a recovering addict, on his trips to support group meetings. Once, they insisted on a strip search in broad daylight on his front steps. When Ms. Sharon's husband was shot as the couple walked home late at night, the ambulance came quickly to pronounce him dead, but it took homicide police 40 minutes to arrive while she waited on the street in front of his body, blood pooling at her feet.

In the past four years there have been over 100 charges of police brutality won or settled against the Baltimore Police Department, as the *Baltimore Sun* documented in 2014. Not surprisingly, distrust of the police is pervasive. Yet violent backlash is very rare. During my fieldwork, I was struck by the equanimity and empathy with which residents regarded the police. "One bad apple don't ruin the bunch," explained Beverly, a 65 year-old homeowner. Despite a great deal of skepticism, Baltimore residents want to trust their police force. They want transparency, accountability, and respect, not war in the streets.

The notion of war is, in fact, manufactured through media fixation on combat imagery, on the deployment of the National Guard, and on the enforcement of curfews. Selective media coverage dangerously skews public perceptions, drawing attention away from persistent, thorny issues like poverty and housing, and the need to improve community-police relations. It also obscures the historical role of federal housing policy and segregation, which have confined blacks to poor neighborhoods with failing schools, poor infrastructure, high vacancies, drug traffic, and crime. Too much focus on brief violent episodes underplays the delicate community building in which so many Baltimore residents have been engaged for the past half century.

Let us not forget the more important images from the week that ignited the fire in Baltimore, viewed through the shaky lens of a cellphone camera. Images of a 25 year-old African American man, Freddie Gray, as his body was dragged into a police van, his legs limp and dangling below him. And the subsequent days of peaceful protests, where residents asked for answers to the real crisis faced by the poorest neighborhoods in Baltimore. The true roots of trouble are there – in the grinding realities of impoverished childhoods, addiction, hazardous housing, and daily toxic encounters between residents and the police charged to serve and protect them.