



Baltimore Riots Cloud O'Malley's Future

Progressive darling couldn't do much to budge Charm City's unemployment rate or stem depopulation

By Liz Mair

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Former Maryland Governor and Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley is taking a beating in some quarters over his tough-on-crime approach and the connections being drawn between it and recent events in his former fiefdom—what used to be known as the Charm City.

But for as much as O'Malley's policing priorities may deserve criticism, [some commentators](#) including [prominent liberals](#) are saying that Baltimore's problems really come back to one big issue: Inequality, that favorite theme of progressive talking points these days.

With that in mind, in addition to having a look at O'Malley's leadership in Baltimore from a criminal justice standpoint, it's also worth looking at his record as both mayor and governor on economic issues, and inequality, specifically—something garnering less attention this week.

Prior to O'Malley assuming the mayoralty, it is fair to say that Baltimore was in [dire economic straits already](#). While the American economy, overall, strengthened in the 1990's, Baltimore saw massive job losses, including in the private sector. The job losses were not just in manufacturing, but also in retail, services and other areas. The city was running an unemployment rate double the non-Baltimore parts of the state. It also saw over 100,000 residents exit its environs, headed for greener suburban pastures, leaving behind houses that stayed empty, except presumably for the giant rats one still sees in parts of Baltimore after dark.

Looking toward the future, Baltimore's situation looked bleak, too. 15 percent of teenagers were unemployed dropouts. Less than 20 percent of third-graders were making the grade in reading. Something like 10 percent of the population was addicted to drugs. Critics charged the city had become too heavily dependent on state and federal government to maintain anything resembling an economy, which—to the extent it served anyone much—seemed only to benefit political cronies grabbing at incentives for development projects.

About 40 percent of Baltimore's budget was state and federal-funded, as of 2001. Some of the politically well-connected elites doing well out of this will almost certainly have been O'Malley allies; the former mayor is, by marriage, part of the entrenched Northeast Baltimore political machine. So, while Baltimore was in pretty deep trouble prior to O'Malley's accession, it's worth remembering that some of the people failing to spread the wealth around and alleviate the

existing inequality problem, as of 1999, were O'Malley friends and allies—people who presumably continued to sit atop the socio-economic pyramid as O'Malley's political career flourished and as he failed to eliminate inequality and related economic problems such as relatively high unemployment in Baltimore versus the rest of Maryland.

In 2004, during O'Malley's tenure as mayor and a time when the US economy was generally regarded as stronger than it has been until relatively recently, in the area surrounding West North Avenue—where riots kicked off early this week—according to city-data.com, average adjusted gross income (AGI) was just \$28,096. That compared to \$60,339 for the rest of the state. By 2011, after O'Malley had been elected to a second term as governor and had had the opportunity to do even more for Baltimore than he had as a mere mayor, the numbers were worse: AGI per city-data.com in the area was \$24,735, whereas in Maryland as a whole, it was \$70,004.

This data reflects a trend also evident from to [Census data published by the Washington Post in 2013](#) (as [noted](#) by Maryland conservative and now-adviser to Gov. Larry Hogan, Mark Newgent). Between 2007 and 2009, and 2010 and 2012 respectively, as the economic recovery played out, Maryland saw an increase in poorer and wealthier households, together with a decline in middle-income households.

As of 2005, the year before O'Malley was elected Maryland governor, according to the Maryland State Archives, Baltimore City's unemployment rate stood at about 1.75 times that of Baltimore County. That was a bit better than the “double” figure noted at the beginning of this piece, but still depressing. The same trend was evident the year after, as well, in 2006.

Throughout O'Malley's tenure as governor, the unemployment rate for Baltimore City continued to run high. As of 2014, the year in which Democrats lost the governorship to Republican Hogan, the ratio was about the same, though overall unemployment numbers for both the City and County were worse. Baltimore County's unemployment rate by then looked more like Baltimore City's in 2006, something that suggests less-than-optimal stewardship where economic matters, overall, are concerned—though O'Malley's team will no doubt dispute who deserves the blame.

Objectively, it may be unfair to stick O'Malley with the charge of failing to fix inequality (or turn Maryland's economy into a model for the nation). Too often, we assign credit and blame for economic changes to those running the government. No doubt some of the “rich getting richer” we have seen of late is a consequences of poorer and middle Americans seeing any capital they had wiped out or diminished in the recession, while wealthier Americans had resources left with which to buy into the stock market when prices were low, only to see it take off since then (making them wealthier still, and in many cases, with yet higher incomes). Perhaps neither O'Malley, nor any other politician, should carry undue responsibility for the inequality trend so many are spotting and spouting off about.

But with that being said, it's unlikely that progressives will accept that argument anytime soon, and will invariably continue to argue that big, corporate greed and wealthy hoarders enabled by right-wing government are to blame for the inequality situation we see when we compare places like Baltimore to its surrounding suburbs. And if that is to be the case, it is worth remembering

this: O'Malley, a proponent of progressive economic policies to the extent that as governor he repeatedly managed only D-grade or worse ratings from the fiscally conservative CATO Institute, did not eliminate inequality evident when looking at Baltimore—nor is his economic record unblemished, particularly from Baltimore's standpoint.

Whether that will be as big a liability for him as his record on criminal justice remains to be seen—just as does his ability to compete on even a small scale, nationally, as 2016 gets underway.