

Baltimore riots sparked not by race but by class tensions between police, poor

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As protesters in Baltimore join a national outcry over police brutality that began with the killing of an unarmed black teen by a white officer in Ferguson, Missouri, the latest unrest stems from class tensions between police and impoverished minority communities, proving that more diverse law enforcement is not a panacea.

Unlike in Ferguson, where a majority black community protested brutality from a mostly white police force, problems in Baltimore are not racial. The mayor, City Council president, police commissioner and nearly half of its 3,000-member police force is black.

In Ferguson, the Department of Justice called for an overhaul of the police department, which had only three black officers in a community that is 67 percent black.

What separates police and community members in Baltimore is not race, but class, where residents in poorer neighborhoods feel targeted by a police force that treats them unfairly.

"It's not so much racism; it's kind of a perception of being treated unfairly, like second-class citizens," said Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute's Project on Criminal Justice.

Mr. Lynch explained that in poorer communities in Baltimore where crime rates are higher, officers tend to use extreme policing tactics against innocent minority residents in anticipation of potential crime being committed.

"The instances pile up, and festering resentment begins to build, and then when somebody is killed it boils over," he said.

The protests center around the death of Freddie Gray, 25, a black man who died a week after suffering a spinal injury while in police custody.

Gray grew up in Sandtown-Winchester, one of Baltimore's most impoverished and most crime-ridden communities. It has the highest incarceration rate in the state, an unemployment rate of over 50 percent for males ages 16 to 64 and a median household income of under \$25,000, according to research from the Justice Policy Institute and the Prison Policy Initiative.

Gray's rap sheet was long. His criminal history started in July 2007 with an arrest on charges of "possession of a controlled dangerous substance with intent to distribute" and "unlawful possession of a controlled dangerous substance."

Overall, he had more than a dozen arrests, mostly drug-related. The latest was in March on a charge of "possession of a controlled dangerous substance."

Drugs are a major reason why police patrolled Gray's neighborhood and for the deteriorating relationship between its residents and the police, said David Simon, creator of "The Wire" and a former Baltimore Sun journalist.

"The part that seems systemic and connected is that the drug war — which Baltimore waged as aggressively as any American city — was transforming in terms of police/community relations, in terms of trust," Mr. Simon said in an interview Wednesday with The Marshall Project. "If I had to guess and put a name on it, I'd say that at some point, the drug war was as much a function of class and social control as it was of racism."

Law enforcement analysts say the poverty and lack of education in Baltimore's urban communities are the real roots of the protesters' outrage and argue that media attention has made police the scapegoat.

"The real issue is poverty and lack of quality education, lack of economic opportunity, a decaying city infrastructure, lack of sound parenting and mentorship," said Jim Pasco, executive director of the National Legislative Office of the Fraternal Order of Police. "These kids, the odds are against them from the time of their conception, and it's a very, very convenient political outlet to blame the police for things that go on in the inner cities. But the fact of the matter is that these are problems that generations of bad elected leadership has resulted in."

Unlike Ferguson, where law enforcement did not represent or interact with the surrounding community, the Baltimore Police Department has numerous outreach programs that connect police with underprivileged families and give communities a chance to communicate directly with officers.

It holds monthly council meetings throughout the city where community leaders can express concerns over issues in their neighborhoods. Some community leaders have even been placed on boards that determine executive promotions within the police department.

"We all, from the top down, have a deep commitment to the community because we are all part of the community, said Sgt. Jarron Jackson, a spokesman for the Baltimore Police Department. "Once they see us as part of the community, it will help us enable them to solve problems. It will help them to not see us as an occupying force because that's not what we are."

Baltimore's patterns of economic segregation — as in other major U.S. cities — began as formal racial segregation broke down in the 1950s, but white flight left black people in underdeveloped inner-city communities while the suburbs flourished, said John Roman, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center.

These poorer, urban areas have higher crime rates, so that is where the police focus their time and have deployed tactics to lead to quicker arrests, analysts say.

"Police say sometimes that they are going where the crime is, they will respond to those neighborhoods in force. But a lot of the tactics that are used raise problems. You have plain-clothes units jumping out of cars suddenly and detaining people without explaining why," said Mr. Lynch of Cato. "With every killing, there might be dozens and dozens of these low-visibility instances where innocent people, especially minority young men, are treated very harshly."

Mr. Roman argued that while police brutality in Baltimore may not be tied directly to racism as it appeared to be in Ferguson, profiling based on class discrimination falls under the same category and is a common thread among communities where similar killings and protests have occurred.

Mr. Roman said Baltimore should look to cities like the District of Columbia that have developed their downtowns and curbed crime rates in the past few decades through increased immigration and gentrification.

"What works are tax breaks for big companies to move in to a city, tax breaks for commercial real estate developers for large retailers, and it's about trying to figure out what the city is good at and capitalizing on that. Baltimore has got the Inner Harbor, it's got a lot of vacation opportunities, it's a question of them figuring out what they can do that's better than everybody," Mr. Roman said.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake recently announced a \$370 million, 10-year economic plan for the city called "Change to Grow," which aims to improve city conditions by eliminating structural deficit, investing in infrastructure and reducing property taxes.