

Racial Violence in Milwaukee Was Decades in the Making, Residents Say

By JOHN ELIGON

AUG. 14, 2016



A prayer vigil on Sunday near the Milwaukee gas station where cars were burned by demonstrators protesting the fatal police shooting of Sylville K. Smith a day earlier.
Joshua Lott for The New York Times

The burning buildings, smashed police cars and scuffles between police officers and angry protesters on Milwaukee's north side over the weekend might have seemed like a spontaneous eruption.

But for many in the city's marginalized black community, it was an explosive release decades in the making.

Milwaukee is one of the United States' most segregated cities, where black men are incarcerated or unemployed at some of the highest rates in the country, and where the difference in poverty between black and white residents is about one and a half times the national average. There are barren lots and worn-down homes all over the predominantly black north side, while mostly white crowds traffic through the restaurants and boutiques downtown, or inhabit the glossy lakefront high rises.

Add to that the disrespect that many black people say the police show them, and many of Milwaukee's African-American residents are unsurprised by the [volatile response](#) after a police officer fatally shot a black man on Saturday — even though, as it turns out, the officer also was black.

“This isn't just, ‘Oh, my gosh, all of a sudden this happened,’” said Sharlen Moore, 39, who lives in Sherman Park, the mostly African-American neighborhood where the shooting and unrest occurred. “It's a series of things that has happened over a period of time. And right now you shake a soda bottle and you open the top and it explodes, and this is what it is.”

Milwaukee, a city of nearly 600,000, joins other embattled parts of the country like Baltimore and Ferguson, Mo., where police killings did not so much draw outrage for the deaths alone, but for the systemic problems that have so many black people feeling hopeless.

In some ways, city officials had been bracing for, if not expecting, a surge of unrest.

After federal prosecutors declined last year to charge a former Milwaukee police officer in the fatal shooting of an unarmed black man, the city's police chief, Edward A. Flynn, asked the Justice Department to work with his department to examine its patterns and practices. The review, Chief Flynn has insisted, would show that his department was doing things right and committed to transparency.

In that shooting from 2014, the victim, Dontre Hamilton, had a history of mental illness and had been sleeping in a park when the officer, Christopher Manney, approached him. Mr. Manney, who was cleared of any criminal wrongdoing, said that Mr. Hamilton, 31, had grabbed his baton and hit him, though some witnesses disputed that account.

Chief Flynn received praise from some black people for firing Mr. Manney, but some criticized the chief because he refused to say that the shooting itself was unjustified.

“At the end of the day, he's going to support his officers, even when wrong is wrong,” Ms. Moore said.

The authorities are still investigating whether the officer in Saturday's shooting did anything wrong. The police have so far said that two men ran from a car, one of them was armed and when he refused orders to drop his gun, an officer fatally shot him.

In his two and a half decades as a Milwaukee police officer, Cedric Jackson said he did not feel that supervisors appropriately addressed concerns of wrongdoing within the department. One common practice, he said, was that after catching suspects who ran, officers would rough them up.

“If they caught you in a backyard or alleyway, they'd want to beat you up,” said Mr. Jackson, who is black and retired in 2011.

His complaints about that custom to colleagues and supervisors were ignored, he said. As was the dismay he expressed about how officers policed communities that were predominantly black. White officers, he said, “really viewed blacks as less than them or animals or not deserving of respect.”

That is how Noble Durrah, 17, said he felt he was treated one day when he was walking home from school with his 4-year-old niece. The police appeared to be chasing someone and they ran through an alley and stopped him. A white officer grabbed him, he said, shoved him down and swore at him as he told him not to move.



The Rev. James E. Groppi, center, at a demonstration in Milwaukee in 1968. The city is one of the most segregated in America. *Paul Shane/Associated Press*

The officer continued his chase and then returned to ask him questions, Mr. Durrah said. “I was like, ‘You just pushed me down and was roughing on me, and you expect me to tell you stuff,’” Mr. Durrah recalled.

Timothy Durrah, 53, Noble’s great-uncle, added that “Milwaukee is one of the most prejudiced cities there is.”

That problem, some residents say, began from the time black people started migrating to Milwaukee in large numbers in the second half of the 20th century.

They settled there as the city’s manufacturing economy began to dwindle, when jobs disappeared or moved to the suburbs. Many black people found themselves trapped in substandard living conditions on the north side without stable jobs to help them reach a better life.

For a time, efforts to tear down the racially discriminatory housing barriers went unheeded, if not ignored. [Vel Phillips](#), the first black woman elected to the City Council, saw her colleagues repeatedly vote against a fair housing ordinance she proposed in the 1960s. As the Council failed to act, riots broke out in July 1967 that led to the deployment of the National Guard. That unrest left at least three dead, 100 injured and 1,740 arrested, according to the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

While historians do not point to a single inciting event for that riot, it came at a time of growing resentment over housing segregation, poor schools and the construction of highways that wiped out many black businesses and households in Bronzeville, which was the economic heart of black Milwaukee.

“Unless something is done about the uninhabitable conditions that the black man has to live in, Milwaukee could become a holocaust,” the Rev. James E. Groppi, a leading civil rights activist at the time, told the City Council five days before the 1967 riot started, according to *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Father Groppi, who died in 1985, eventually would lead 200 straight days of protests, and the city finally passed its fair housing law after Congress passed its landmark federal legislation in 1968.

But while many formal discriminatory barriers have fallen, many black residents of Milwaukee today see a persistent racial divide that they say has created an urgency similar to what Father Groppi expressed decades ago.

“The people have been calm,” Dontre Hamilton’s brother, Nate, told reporters two years ago after local prosecutors declined to file charges. “The people have not stood up. So when will we stand up?”

Imbalances in mortgage lending continue to stifle homeownership and devalue predominantly black areas. A study released last month by National Community Reinvestment Coalition found that while black people made up 16 percent of the metro population in 2014, they received only 4 percent of the loans.

While court-ordered and voluntary desegregation programs had helped to usher in school integration by 1987, those programs have since faded and schools in the metropolitan area are as segregated now as they were in 1965. Nearly three in four black students attend schools where at least 90 percent of the students are not white, according to Marc V. Levine, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Only 15.7 percent of Milwaukee Public School students tested proficient in reading in 2013-14, and 20.3 percent in math.

And even those people fortunate enough to graduate from these highly segregated schools have a grim outlook. Nearly one out of every eight black men in Milwaukee County has served time behind bars, according to a 2013 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee study. The black unemployment rate in Milwaukee County is 20 percent, nearly three times greater than for white people.

These social ills foster a grim cycle, said Reggie Moore, who is the director of the city's Office of Violence Prevention and is married to Ms. Moore. They create transient communities with a lot of poverty, he said, where residents are less likely to be invested and engaged in what is going on, which allows crime to fester more easily.

Tackling the root causes of crime would be the most effective way to make the community safer and calm tensions, he said.

"I think it's a matter of having a dual conversation about what justice needs to look like in this particular situation, but also the broader conversation of what a just community looks like," Mr. Moore said. "What are the systemic issues that need to be addressed around poverty, racism, segregation and inequity to reduce the likelihood of this happening again?"

Kay Nolan contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on August 15, 2016, on page A14 of the New York edition with the headline: Violence in Milwaukee Was No Shock to Some.