

# *When Police Don't Live in the City They Serve*

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Milwaukee police officers in riot gear prepared for a 6 p.m. park curfew ordered by the sheriff on Monday in the wake of violent protests. *Joshua Lott for The New York Times*

MILWAUKEE — The split-second law enforcement decision of when to pull the trigger often comes down to perception. Is that person acting suspiciously? Is he or she a threat?

And so much of the criticism of the police that has roiled the country over the past couple of years has centered on whether officers know the communities they patrol and understand the culture of the people who live in them.

It is a question that residents have been particularly passionate about here since the Wisconsin Supreme Court in June upheld a state law that eliminated a requirement that Milwaukee police officers live in the city.

Some African-American residents worry that eliminating the requirement will only worsen a long-strained relationship between black communities and the police. The fractured relationship has been on display over the past week after the fatal police shooting of an armed black man, Sylville K. Smith, led to [explosive street demonstrations](#).

Keyon Jackson-Malone, a resident of the city's predominantly black north side, said he feared that without a residency requirement, people would start coming from farther and farther away to serve as Milwaukee police officers. The metropolitan area's suburbs and exurbs are among the whitest in the country, and some have a rural feel.

"There's some white people that actually only know black people by what they've ever heard," Mr. Jackson-Malone said. "There's no experience. There's no, 'I went to school with 30 of them.' "

Rather, he added: "There's a lot of: 'I'm in fear of my life. They're superhuman. They're animals. They're savage.' A person that's lived up north all their life has never had to come to the inner city, but he's going to police this kid. He don't understand about, Mama may be on drugs. He don't have no empathy for the situation."

Battles over residency requirements for police officers have been fought across the country, in places as far-flung as Baton Rouge, La., and Pittsburgh. Typically, police unions are at the fore of opposition to the requirements, arguing that officers should have the freedom to choose where to live. And national tensions over policing have highlighted another argument.

"Right now, the community hates us," James Stewart Jr., a Newark detective and president of its chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police, told the New Jersey Legislature last year, [according to NJ.com](#). "Everything you see on social media, everything you see in the media, the community hates the police. And you want to put us right in the middle of that with our families?"

As it turns out, the officer involved in the shooting last week was black and lived in Milwaukee, so his residency or understanding of the community might not have been an issue. But residents said their gripes extended beyond a single episode.

Anger toward the police here has built over the years in the wake of several high-profile police killings of black people.

Derek Williams, 22, [suffocated five years ago](#) after the police handcuffed him in the back of a squad car and ignored his complaints that he was having

trouble breathing until after he had fallen unconscious. The local prosecutor declined to charge the officers involved in Mr. Williams's arrest, and the police chief, Edward A. Flynn, supported the decision.



Demonstrators outside a police station in Milwaukee on Sunday protested the fatal police shooting of Sylville K. Smith. *Joshua Lott for The New York Times*

Two years ago, Dontre D. Hamilton, 31, who had a history of mental illness, was fatally shot by an officer who had gotten into a struggle with Mr. Hamilton after waking him while he slept in a park. Federal and local prosecutors [declined to file charges](#) against the officer, Christopher Manney, who was fired from the force.

To many people here, these deaths are part of a broader culture of aggression and disrespect toward black residents in a police force that largely does not reflect the community. While black and Latino residents make up about 57 percent of the city, they are 31 percent of the police force.

Johnny Winston, a longtime resident, said he felt police disrespect during a prayer march on Sunday. The march took place the day after buildings and cars went up in flames during raucous demonstrations over the killing of Mr.

Smith, who the police said had disobeyed orders to drop a gun while he was chased.

Mr. Winston, a deacon at the Greater New Birth Baptist church in Milwaukee, said he had marched with about 100 church members, many wearing red T-shirts with the word “Grace” printed in large block letters on the front and a Bible verse about “healing the brokenhearted” on the back. As they passed the Milwaukee District 7 police station, Mr. Winston said, they held their arms high in the air to show they were unarmed.

But officers clustered near the station and on its roof greeted the marchers “with their hands on their guns,” Mr. Winston said.

“They jumped out of their squad cars with rifles and billy clubs,” he added. “We just wanted to get our point across. We just want peace.”

Greg Luellen, 26, said he had had several run-ins with the law and had served time in jail. He does not so much begrudge the police for being tough on people, he said; he just wishes they would be more discerning.

“They feel threatened, they’re scared,” he said. “I’m not going to blame them. Their job requires them to go out and deal with people they don’t know. I can’t knock them for what they do.” But, he added, “you can’t judge everybody, because everybody ain’t the same.”

Mayor Tom Barrett said that eliminating the residency requirement would only stifle efforts to make the police force more diverse and strengthen the city’s economy.

“It actually makes the potential for both of those problems to get worse,” he said. “You’re going to have more middle-class incomes leaving the city. I’m very concerned about the impact of this law on police-community relations.”

The residency fight began three years ago, when the Republican-led State Legislature passed a law prohibiting cities from requiring municipal employees, including the police, to live in the cities they serve. The city continued to enforce its more than 75-year-old residency requirement, but unions for the Police and Fire Departments sued, leading to the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling.

City workers had started moving out of Milwaukee while the case made its way through the courts. Currently, 364 sworn Milwaukee police officers, or about 20 percent of the force, live outside the city, according to the mayor’s office.

Detective Michael V. Crivello, a 25-year veteran of the force who is president of the Milwaukee Police Association, said officers spent so much time in the

neighborhoods they served that they came to know them well and to understand the people there.

“For our officers, it is a vocation, a calling to be a police officer,” he said. “When they come to a neighborhood to police that neighborhood, that neighborhood becomes their neighborhood.”

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