Baltimore riots point to a flip side of America's urban renaissance

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ABSTRACT

According to census data compiled by Pete Saunders of "The Corner Side Yard" blog, Baltimore is among a dozen American cities seeing very concentrated gentrification over the past 30 years - meaning, in essence, that tourist districts are very close to "rough" parts of town.

FULL TEXT

The Baltimore riots in many ways point to the flip side of an American urban renaissance.

The death of Freddie Gray, a 20-something black Baltimore man, after he was detained by six Baltimore police officers on April 12 is seen at least in part as a tragic outcome of a tradition of aggressive policing tactics throughout the United States. Those tactics have roiled some of the neighborhoods that have benefited from the violent crime rate being halved since the late 1990s.

But at the core of the frustration fueling the Gray protests and riots, historians say, are the lines between different neighborhoods that police are being asked to patrol in the name of public safety - particularly, to ease crime fears for developers and Millennials eyeing a return to America's urban cores.

In that way, the riots resonate far beyond Baltimore to other cities enjoying an era of relative peace, prosperity, and progress.

"[Tough] policing tactics seem antiquated until you realize that gentrification itself requires a new level of policing, exactly at the segregated borders that divide these cities," says George Ciccariello-Maher, a political theorist at Drexel University in Philadelphia. "I'm no sympathizer of the police, but they're there to perform a function, which is to contain a population that has never been economically supported or economically developed."

Reaction from the city's black political class has been tough on the rioters, including Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake calling them out as "thugs." Apparently led by a social media call to enact a "purge" - one day of lawlessness - rioters burned some 144 cars and looted and set aflame stores. Other groups led peaceful protests around the city.

The National Guard was called in - the first time the guardsmen have been summoned to quell unrest in Baltimore since 1968, when some neighborhoods smoldered after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

Critics say the unrest can be traced in part to policing policies enacted in the late 1990s, when Baltimore's annual

homicide rate - mostly black-on-black killings - regularly exceeded 300. A "zero tolerance" policy put in place by then-Mayor Martin O'Malley, now a prospective Democratic presidential candidate, resulted in a halving of the violent crime rate, setting the rough-hewn city on course for economic revival. But the policy came at a steep cost, as the city's poorer neighborhoods saw that "countless innocent people were getting caught up in [a] dragnet style of policing," Sonia Kumar of the American Civil Liberties Union said to The New York Times.

"The crime drop that began in the 1990s has had a transforming effect on American cities and has made them more attractive places to live, and more rewarding and congenial places for residents who have been there a long time," says Robert Snyder, an American studies professor at Rutgers University in Newark, N.J. "But [some longtime black residents] feel that the benefit of lower crime, which they wanted passionately for many decades, has set up an odd situation: We've exchanged the problem of crime for the problem of being stopped and frisked on the street."

According to census data compiled by Pete Saunders of "The Corner Side Yard" blog, Baltimore is among a dozen American cities seeing very concentrated gentrification over the past 30 years - meaning, in essence, that tourist districts are very close to "rough" parts of town. From Atlanta to Philadelphia to New Orleans, they share these characteristics: They're old enough to be highly walkable, and they have historically high concentrations of black residents.

The complaints from some neighborhoods are particularly acute in cities like Philadelphia and Baltimore, and even in Atlanta, where black political leadership has at times failed to address inequities in education and opportunity. In that way, rioters and protesters are rejecting the calls for calm from an older civil rights generation in favor of asserting their own power on the streets. Baltimore officials reported that more looting was taking place on Tuesday.

"We're seeing a rupture with civil rights politics, a rupture with established leaders who think that the battle was won when formal political equality was established," says Mr. Ciccariello-Maher at Drexel. "But those leaders have neglected the fact that substantial equality never came - that, in fact, we're going backwards. There's a deepening of economic inequality, resegregation of neighborhoods, and resegregation of schools."

Former Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon echoed that in an interview with the Baltimore Sun. "The people [involved] are feeling [sad] about what happened to Freddie Gray," she said. Their pain emotions intensify because their neighborhood is "not benefiting from everything happening in the city" with economic development.

But beyond big-picture debates about economic and race disparities in up-and-coming cities like Baltimore, many of the changes that cities face have more to do with addressing fears - in particular, those that affect how police officers view neighborhoods.

"I just want [police] to be able, when they come into our community, not to be afraid of us," Darlene Cain, a Baltimore mom whose son was killed by a Baltimore officer in 2008, told The New York Times. "Be able to say, 'Hello, good morning.' Don't just sit in your car and look at us like we're the next person you want to lock up."

Calming racial fears, helping black neighborhoods develop economically, and ending prosecution policies that disproportionately affect young black men are some potential public policy retorts to the pain seen in the streets, urban culture experts say.

Baltimore, for one, has already moved to address police brutality concerns, in part by firing more than 50 officers

since 2012 and offering better training to the corps. Following Mr. Gray's death, Mayor Rawlings-Blake said she wants to make police more accountable by adding body cameras to their uniforms.

Though the Maryland legislature refused to even hear a bill that would make it easier to probe police misconduct, the General Assembly did pass six bills this spring to address police brutality - including measures doubling the maximum civil lawsuit awards in cases where police injure citizens and requiring that police departments report all police-involved killings in the state.

"We're desperately looking for practical solutions," Baltimore attorney William "Billy" Murphy, who has appeared with Gray's family, told The Sun. "As long as this is regarded as a white-black issue instead of a human issue, we will remain divided."

While a number of US cities, including Baltimore, have enjoyed urban renewal in recent years, not all neighborhoods have come along equally - and the policing tactics used in this patchwork have led to frustration.

Credit: Patrik Jonsson Staff writer

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