Building Blocks of an Uprising

The following are summaries of five articles about racial inequality in Baltimore. These summaries can be used to understand the context for the events leading up to the 2015 Baltimore Uprising. Students can also conduct additional research to find reporting and opinion about the causes of the Uprising.

Vacant Houses in Baltimore:

"Housing our Neighbors" is a group that says vacant housing should be available to homeless people, but the city has had a difficult time rehabilitating poor neighborhoods and critics question the plan. Sandtown-Winchester has a high number of vacant buildings, but vacancy is a problem throughout the city. Officially, there are16,000 vacant houses. However, this number only includes houses defined as uninhabitable. Many houses that are potentially habitable –even if no one lives in them-- are not included in the official number. In fact, there may be as many as 47,000 empty houses, that's 16 percent of the homes within the city.

Why? Deinstustrialization is a major cause. The closing of steel plants led to high unemployment and people who could afford to, left the city and moved to the suburbs. The rug trade flourished as a side effect of unemployment, and deflated property values further. Real estate agents and investors abandoned the city. These trends mean that vacant buildings are associated with higher rates of violence, crime and fire and, higher rates of policing (and higher costs).

Yet, many in Baltimore cannot afford to purchase or rent vacant housing because they occupy low-skill, low paying jobs in the service and tourist sector that replaced industry. For every 100 low income households, there are only 29 affordable units.

Neighborhoods where the most people protested during the 2015 Uprising tended to have the highest number of abandoned homes. "Housing Our Neighbors" says we need to act by: investing in poor neighborhoods and rehabilitating houses; creating community land trusts in which a nonprofit agency owns and manages affordable housing –there are 260 across the country. Some critics disagree saying "people need jobs, not housing. Twenty years ago James Rouse poured 130 million into the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood to renovate and rehabilitate more than 1000 houses. But his efforts did not have a strong impact. A Johns Hopkins University Sociologist says the focus of Rouse's investment was on the EFFECTS of poverty and homelessness, not on the causes.

Baltimore Riots point to Flip Side of Urban Renaissance:

In Baltimore, urban gentrification has been very concentrated. As a result, tourist districts tend to border poverty stricken and underdeveloped neighborhoods. This has often meant that police patrol neighborhood like Sandtown-Winchester that have not benefitted from gentrification in order to protect tourist areas and keep local people away. One of the root causes of the Uprising of 2015 was frustration about this dynamic. Police tend to enforce borders between neighborhoods in order to ease the fears of developers, tourists, and wealthier residents, rather than patrolling in order to "serve and protect" local people in poorer neighborhoods.

The 2015 unrest can also be traced to policies enacted in the late 1990s. A zero tolerance policy on crime meant that the crime rate was reduced BUT many innocent people were caught up in over-policing "dragnet." Many black residents feel we have exchanged the problem of crime with the problem of "stop and frisk." Black political leadership has often failed to address inequalities in education and opportunity so there is a rupture in civil rights: older leaders thought the battle was won with political equality, but younger protesters point to deepening economic inequality, re-segregation of neighborhoods and schools. Beyond policy debates, cities also deal with addressing fears, fear that impacts how police officers view neighborhoods.

Deep Troubling Roots of Baltimore's Decline:

Baltimore is a city of 620,000 people, 63.7 percent of whom are black. The city's political system is largely run by black people, including the police. This is rare. City leaders believed the presence of black people in politics and law enforcement would foster greater trust and more open communication between citizens and government, but the basic position of low-income people did not change. In Sandtown-Winchester 50% of residents are unemployed, 60% have less than high school diploma, 1/3 of homes are vacant. The neighborhood also has the highest violent crime rate in Baltimore. WHY is this the case? In the early 20th century civic leaders sought to "protect white neighborhoods." They endorsed segregation plans and allowed the adoption of racial covenants that isolated black people on small parcels of land in the inner city. By 1930s, black people made up 20% of Baltimore's population but lived on only 2% of the city's land. Both formal and informal segregation has kept black people from expanding their neighborhoods or moving into white areas. During the 1940s public housing was created to relieve this crisis, but public housing was still segregated. Five of six public housing projects were placed in the densest black

neighborhoods in the East and West. Even with the wartime housing and employment boom, the city still lacked stable employment for black residents. In the1950s urban renewal impacted the city. What is urban renewal? Federal funds became available for "slum clearance" to make way for highways, business districts, and highrise public housing projects. In Baltimore this process displaced 25,000 people. Segregated public housing continued to bolster and entrench past segregation. The borders of black neighborhoods in the period between 1964 - 1968 were identical to those from 50 years earlier. Baltimore's segregation has been remarkably stable over time. It has never been addressed or unraveled. Further harm was brought to the city in the 1980s and 1990s during the drug wars.

How Ferguson Changed America:
There is has been a great deal of recent attention given to the killing of unarmed black men by police, including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others. The death of Michael Brown was a turning point because it drew attention to the impact of a long history of segregation, redlining, and "white flight" on race relations in St. Louis. It also illuminated the way a predatory municipal government can extract money from poor residents through over-policing and a fine heavy municipal court system. Brown's death led to protests and disorder that was met by heavily armed militarized police. It also spawned a new generation of activists. DeRay McKesson and Johnetta Elzie honed a new kind of advocacy using social media to unify opinion and mobilize protests. These efforts coalesced into the Black Lives Matter movement. The timing of Brown's killing was also significant. Previous incidents compounded one another and built anger and consensus. The incidents are often preserved on video, so people witnessed them. Then-President Barack Obama took action in a way that had no happened in previous cases. He sent the Attorney General and the Department of Justice to launch an investigation. Thus, the death of Freddie Gray can be seen as part of a broader context of police violence and death –each incident generated new coverage, new protests, new stories, new activism.

Why Baltimore Blew Up:
Modern law enforcement and institutionalized racism, have negatively impacted the job of policing. Most Individual police officers have good intentions, but modern systems of policing tend to destabilize police-community relationships. For example, "Broken Windows" policing isn't designed to promote justice or economic growth, it is designed to contain crime, and it presumes that disorder and poverty are predictors and indicators of crime. Under this policy, police stop people in troubled neighborhoods for any infraction, no matter how minor, because they believe this can deter more serious crime. New York City established the precedent for this type of policing. Introduced in NYC in 1990, it included an attitude of zero tolerance and questionnable policies like stop and frisk. It also emphasized "community policing," sending large numbers of police into poor neighborhoods, thereby increasing confrontations with local resident. All of these are more intensely interventionist strategies that rely on and create an adversarial relationship between police and local people. These tactics are inherently discriminatory.

At first this style of enforcement seemed like a good idea, crime abated. BUT after crime decreased, the level of policing did not decline and a racial disparity became clear: in white rich neighborhoods, police are last resort. In poor black neighborhoods, police are constantly surveilling, stopping, and detaining people. They do not wait for a call, they initiate action. Legal precedent was established in 1968 with the case Terry v. Ohio. Judges in the case decided that police can approach and search anyone seen as 'suspicious.'

Then mayor of Baltimore, Martin O'Malley, launched his own "zero tolerance" campaign in the early 2000s under circumstances similar to those in New York. At the peak of this policy in Baltimore in 2005, 108,000 of 600,000 residents were arrested (18% of the city's population). The NAACP and the ACLU filed lawsuits in 2006 against the city and succeeded in seeing some changes. Nonetheless, black residents in Baltimore still suffered from over-policing and police brutality. Freddie Gray KNEW he was going to be beaten if he was caught by police. Most local people decide against fighting back. Most often, detained individuals spend an entire day in a police van and a night in jail. Most cases never amount to much.

These policies violate basic civil rights and they are also bad for police –they create high volume, low yield law enforcement. There have been no real consequences, however. Incidents of police brutality and death at the hands of police officers have been the subject of research but rarely the subject of successful legal action. Charges against officers are often dropped, and records are expunged. Many people are manipulated into signing waivers, so they cannot make any claims against police. Even if there are grounds for a lawsuit, most of the times there is a nondisclosure agreement. No one is ever held accountable. Even in those cases where a lawsuit is possible, victims are required to file a notice within six months. If they do not hire a lawyer immediately, they cannot make the deadline. Legal counsel is expensive and out of reach for most people. In most cities it is nearly impossible to get a police officer removed for lies, abuse, or other misconduct.