

Get the Workbook Newsletter

Free daily updates delivered just for you.

Wonkblog

The long, painful and repetitive history of how Baltimore became Baltimore

By **Emily Badger** April 29

Before there was a funeral and protest, then violence, curfews and canceled ballgames in Baltimore this week, there were other chapters in the life of this city that must be remembered.

Just a few years ago, Wells Fargo agreed to pay millions of dollars to Baltimore and its residents to settle a landmark lawsuit brought by the city claiming the bank [unfairly steered minorities who wanted to own homes into subprime mortgages](#). Before that, there was the crack epidemic of the 1990s and the rise of mass incarceration and the decline of good industrial jobs in the 1980s.

And before that? From 1951 to 1971, 80 to 90 percent of the 25,000 families displaced in Baltimore to build new highways, schools and housing projects were black. Their neighborhoods, already disinvested and deemed dispensable, were sliced into pieces, the parks where their children played bulldozed.

And before that — now if we go *way* back — there was redlining, the earlier corollary to subprime lending in which banks refused to lend at all in neighborhoods that federally backed officials had identified as having "undesirable racial concentrations."

These shocks happened, at least 80 years of them, to the same communities in Baltimore, as they did in cities across the country. Neighborhoods weakened by mass incarceration were the same ones divided by highways. Families cornered into subprime loans descended from the same families who'd been denied homeownership — and the chance to build wealth — two generations earlier. People displaced today by new development come from the same communities that were scattered before in the name of "slum clearance" and the progress brought by Interstate highways.

And the really terrible irony — which brings us back to Baltimore today — is that each of these shocks further diminished the capacity of low-income urban black communities to recover from the one that came next. It's an

irony, a fundamental urban inequality, [created over the years by active decisions and government policies](#) that have undermined the same people and sapped them of their ability to rebuild, that have again and again dismantled the same communities, each time making them socially, economically, and politically weaker.

[\[Despite calm in Baltimore, reminders of unrest linger\]](#)

"We keep moving the baseline down," says Mindy Fullilove, a social psychiatrist at Columbia University who has studied the "[root shock](#)" people experience when their communities are repeatedly destabilized, dispersed and abandoned by anyone with resources. "People who are losing their homes to gentrification also got injured by deindustrialization and mass incarceration and urban renewal.

"They're not separate — they're inextricably linked. And it's the cumulative downward force of this on social organization that's the stunning thing to be accounted for."

It's the thing that created the [deeply and racially unequal Baltimore we have today](#) — and that lies behind the protests rising there now.

In Fullilove's research on urban renewal, 67 percent of people displaced by such demolition projects nationwide were black. Those people who moved lost their social networks as well as their homes. Over time, deindustrialization took their decent blue-collar jobs, too. And because we never invested in the kind of education low-income urban communities would need to find work in a post-industrial world, low-skilled workers today are left with worse prospects today than they had two generations ago.

[\[What you really need to know about Baltimore, from a report who's lived there for 30 years\]](#)

It's little wonder, then, that dealing drugs might look like a viable way to keep a family afloat in a neighborhood with soaring unemployment. It's no wonder that incarceration would follow, along with family breakdown. And it's no great surprise that Baltimore's deeply troubled neighborhoods today are many of the same ones that were deemed "undesirable" 75 years ago.

Researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University's Center on Society and Health have found that Baltimore neighborhoods that were redlined in the 1930s [still have lower rates of homeownership and college attainment](#) and higher rates of poverty and segregation today — as well as [worse health outcomes](#).

"Policies that were set in place back in the 1930s, the 1940s that set up the redlining were also setting these other cycles in motion," says the Steven Woolf, the center's director, "where you have generations of illness that are actually being passed on."

These cycles are not unique to Baltimore, which is also why the unrest in Baltimore this week feels more like a movement that's bound to spread than the mere outburst of a few "thugs." These cycles have gained such momentum that the difference in life expectancy between the wealthiest and poorest neighborhoods is [13 years in Atlanta](#), and [16 years in Chicago](#), and [20 years in Richmond](#).

"I read some of this violence as the oppressed insisting on a reading of the present and history that's more truthful about what's actually going down," says Lionel Foster, a former columnist at the Baltimore Sun who lived in the city for years. "Collectively, we don't have it. We don't speak that truth."

The history of poverty in Baltimore

▶ **Play Video** 1:54

We don't acknowledge that we created slums and perpetuated poverty. We don't acknowledge that people who are poor were denied the chance to build wealth. And we don't acknowledge that the problems we attribute to poor neighborhoods reflect generations of decisions made by people who have never lived there.

[\[In Baltimore, questions about policing ensnare mayors past and present\]](#)

The historic scale of these forces also helps to explain why even a city with a black mayor and a black police chief isn't immune to racial unrest. Several minority elected officials in 2015 can't be a corrective to decades of compounding policy. Nor can a few pilot projects and fleeting government grants.

Yes, the outright racism that motivated many of these historic policies has eroded with time. "But we have to understand," Fullilove says, "the machine can work without the operator."

The protesters in Baltimore, she says, are expressing their rage against that machine, which is a thing much larger than the death of one man, or even the singular issue of police-community relations. To call the unrest this week a "riot," the people behind it "thugs" — as Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake did this week — misses all of these interrelated pieces that Baltimore gives us a chance to reconsider.

[A Freddie Gray primer: Who was he, how did he die, why is there so much anger?]

"That was a colossal fail," Johns Hopkins sociologist Stefanie DeLuca says of the language public officials have been using this week. "I thought the governor calling Baltimore a 'state of emergency' was a colossal fail. These framings don't help us — they take away from the humanity of the people here who have grievances. It takes away from the incredible potential of a city that has been struggling and fighting for everything it has."

Emily Badger is a reporter for Wonkblog covering urban policy. She was previously a staff writer at The Atlantic Cities.

PROMOTED STORIES

Recommended by



21 Colleges That Nobody Wants to Go to Anymore

StartClass



Steam Machine Release Dates and Pre-Orders Revealed

IGN



Your 401k Isn't Growing as Fast as It Should - Here's Why

Mint.com



Two Savings Accounts That Pay 10 Times What Your Bank Pays

WiserSaver.com



5 Outrageous Credit Cards For Those That Have Great Credit

Lending Tree



Heidi Klum Fires Back at Donald Trump After He Says She's Not a 10 Anymore

People
