



How U.S. Urban Unrest in the 1960s Can Help Make Sense of Ferguson, Missouri, and Other Recent Protests

Ashley M. Howard, University of Iowa

Recent protests in U.S. cities including Ferguson, Missouri, recall America's "long hot summers" of decades ago – even though the protests of recent times are far from reaching the scope and scale of urban revolts back then. Between 1965 and 1968, 329 urban rebellions took place in 257 U.S. cities, resulting in nearly 300 deaths, 60,000 arrests, and hundreds of millions of dollars in property loss. For nearly fifty years this type of protest has lain largely dormant. But within the past decade, incidents of mass urban protest, sometimes including violent outbursts, are happening once again. Can we take lessons from the past to better understand roots and remedies for present unrest? I believe so. Urban rebellions must be understood as complex, deliberate mechanisms through which the desperate seek political recourse they feel they cannot get by other means. By understanding the texture of these modern rebellions, activists, elected officials, and policymakers can hope to find solutions that improve upon past failures.

Root Causes of the 1960s Uprisings

The causes of the 1960s revolts in so many American cities were complex and intertwined. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 transformed the South but had limited impact in the urban North. In northern cities, high wages and stable employment were undermined by deindustrialization and automation, and black working-class people increasingly felt the weight of racial mistreatment combined with economic distress. Charged with diagnosing the urban outbursts after the fact, the final report of the Kerner Commission (officially the National Advisory Board on Civil Disorders) concluded that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal."

- African American unemployment was consistently double the white rate, and black workers were crowded into the lowest skilled and least well paid occupations.
- "Redlining" by mortgage lenders restricted the areas in which black urban dwellers could live, resulting in overpriced, overcrowded and inferior housing.
- Black students experienced de facto segregation, lack of black teachers, overcrowded schools, and biased school boards.

Despite significant improvements following the Civil Rights movement, glaring inequities remained – and many urban residents felt they had little chance to protest and get redress in nonviolent ways. In his article for *Fortune* magazine on "The New Negro Mood," sociologist Roger Beardwood noted that 40% of respondents said that violence and rioting were necessary to achieve black objectives.

Uprisings Then and Now

Sixties rebellions in major cities like Detroit and Los Angeles got the most media coverage, but the uprisings then were much more widespread. In 1967 alone 80% of revolts took place in cities with populations smaller than 500,000. Furthermore, urban outbursts were usually sparked by a specific kind of incident – an episode of real or rumored police brutality toward poor, minority urban residents. Incidents might start as peaceful protests, but then often escalated into looting and vandalism directed against sites of authority or businesses seen as exploitative. Participants articulated their grievances to local government, and traditional community leaders such as clergy or Civil Rights activists advocated for mutually agreeable solutions that promised new policies and programs. Unfortunately these promises, while progressive in purpose, soon faltered in the face of turf wars and decreased funding as the national mood shifted against anti-poverty efforts.

As in the 1960s, protests in recent years have been sparked by perceptions of unfair policing in economically disadvantaged minority urban communities. But there are also differences.

- Perhaps with earlier unrest in mind, local and state police today use military training and equipment to suppress protests with overwhelming force.
- Even more media outlets than in the 1960s compete to report major flare-ups between police and urban protestors – but the Internet now allows protestors and their supporters to spread messages of their own about the inequalities to which they are responding.
- Gendered symbolisms have changed; the 1960s protests featured black men unable to protect their communities; today they feature black mothers unable to protect their sons.

Reforms are the Best Remedies

It remains true, however, that urban unrest is best addressed by improvements in economic and educational opportunities, along with specific reforms in criminal justice and urban governance:

- **Include racial realities in training for law enforcement.** Beyond lip service to “diversity,” training should help officials understand bitterness bred by racial inequities.
- **End surplus military goods subsidies to police.** Cities do not need tanks and military assault weapons to deal with protesting citizens.
- **Eliminate police-run investigations.** Individual officers charged with wrongdoing must be investigated by independent authorities, and broader problems should be reviewed by community boards with authority to recommend binding changes.
- **Collaborate with community members, including youth,** to address neighborhood ills in permanent ways that residents can embrace and help to direct.

To head off urban protests and the potential for violence, cooperation for justice must be the watchword. America has made strides but has a long way to go to reduce still-glaring racial and economic disparities and to ensure that institutions serving the most marginalized communities are the best, not the worst, the nation has to offer.

Read more in Ashley M. Howard, “Prairie Fires: Urban Rebellions as Black Working Class Politics in Three Midwestern Cities,” PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012.