

Set-Up City: The Voices of Baltimore Youth After the April 2015 Unrest

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2015, amidst the unrest following the death of Freddie Gray, national and local media were quick to cast the youth in Baltimore as “thugs” and troublemakers. However, these media accounts were nearly devoid of the voices of youth themselves. To discover these voices, the *Hearing Their Voices* team at the Poverty and Inequality Research Lab at Johns Hopkins University conducted in-depth interviews with 58 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 from some of Baltimore’s most impoverished neighborhoods. These youth told a far more nuanced and deeper story than media accounts reflect. The purpose of this report is to illuminate these stories and describe major themes from the accounts of Baltimore’s youth interviewed for this study. Findings include:

- **Youth participation in the unrest may have been less widespread than media reports suggested.** Many of the young people interviewed for this project simply spent the afternoon of April 27, 2015 trying to get home, and most “sheltered in place” there for the days that followed.
- **Young people in Baltimore generally supported the peaceful protests but almost uniformly condemned the violence, looting, and destruction of property that occurred.** They were especially distressed by the devastation of important institutions that served disadvantaged Baltimore neighborhoods.
- **Young people in Baltimore generally disapproved of the city’s aggressive response to the unrest, including the school closings and curfew.** Though they recognized the National Guard for their role in restoring and maintaining order, Baltimore’s youth felt intimidated and even terrified by its presence. The leadership of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings Blake during the unrest received almost universal disapproval from the youth interviewed for this study.
- **The antagonistic relationship between Baltimore’s youth and its police force is more nuanced than portrayed in the media.** Youth did not have a blanket distrust or dislike of the Baltimore police force, but described how actions by certain “bad apples” sullied the reputation the force had with the city as a whole.
- **Young people revealed a very strong sense of abandonment by and exclusion from Baltimore City as a whole.** Lack of good education, little viable economic opportunity, and the prominence of drug activity and violence in Baltimore create an environment that the young people in the study said set them up for failure rather than success. Not one of the 58 youth interviewed for the study expressed a desire to stay in Baltimore City in the future.
- **Baltimore’s youth crave positive experiences in recreation centers, programs oriented toward youth development and careers, and safe public spaces.** However, they do not see Baltimore City as doing enough—if anything—to provide these opportunities.

The voices of Baltimore’s youth are sobering but provide inspiration and suggest the incredible potential of these young people. The findings in this report are a powerful and clear directive for the city’s leaders to act swiftly and systematically to improve the prospects of a generation of youth who are eager to find their futures.

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A report from the Poverty and Inequality Research Lab at Johns Hopkins University

Baltimore. I mean, I love my city to death, but this is setup city. They set it up for you to fail.
-Jayden, 20

INTRODUCTION

When we talked with sixteen-year-old Toya, she was about to start her junior year at Dunbar High School, with hopes of attending college and maybe becoming a chef. She was born in Baltimore and grew up with her mother, five siblings, uncle, and grandmother. Recently, she started to split her time between homes—staying part-time with two of her cousins in Milton Montford in East Baltimore and the rest of the time with her grandmother, who lives near her school. Her mother had recently moved to Atlanta and Toya’s father, whom she was close to, died of a heart attack when she was eleven.

When school got out on April 27, 2015, Toya remembered her friend saying, “‘Oh, my mother just called and she said that she was going to come pick us up and take us home,’ because you know, they planning on, they was planning on going down [to Mondawmin Mall].” After arriving home, Toya remembered, “I went straight to the TV and I watched what was going on.” Toya did not join in any of the unrest activity - the peaceful protests or the riots - because her grandmother, fearing for her safety, told her not to participate. Toya reflected on the motivation behind the rioting: “I feel as though the whole situation was wrong, but the way that people, like, reacted to it was wrong, too. Like, some people shouldn’t have did the things that they did, but they just did it because they wanted to. Because they felt like they needed to.” She distinguished between the positivity of the peaceful marches, which she felt “brought people together, you know, to talk about how they really feel,” and the negativity of the violence and property damage that occurred. Toya described how in some cases, protests devolved into violence as “a few idiots in the protest that want to throw stuff at the police [even] when it’s a silent protest.”

But Toya recognized that her peers and neighbors were also fed up with police brutality, and saw a silver lining in the events—they brought needed attention to the problem:

...the whole situation [the unrest], at least brought light, it at least brought the media to a situation and, like, let people know what was going on because it’s a lot of that happening in Baltimore. Like a lot of police is, white and black, they mistreating these people just because they got a badge. Like, I don’t get that. You supposed to be here to protect me, not to hurt me.

Toya felt intimidated by the National Guard in her neighborhood, who were called in by the Governor to restore order, because of the “big guns that they had,” but recognized “they [were]

here to protect us.” She criticized Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake’s decision to institute a curfew in the aftermath of the unrest, explaining, “I think it was kind of dumb ‘cause people need to go to work.” Toya also denounced the mayor’s use of the word “thugs” to describe the protestors and felt that she did not do a good job handling the crisis, describing the mayor as “nonchalant” and distant:

I don't think she [Mayor Rawlings-Blake] was really, her motive was really to, like, to actually make a change or actually help. But it did work for a little while. But I don't think that she, I don't for real even think that she even cared. She's just there to be there... [She doesn't] really, like, try to connect with the community. She don't really go out and talk to people. At least that's what I think. I don't see her do that. No, she don't really like, listen to know what the people have to say. ...”

The media exacerbated the crisis, Toya said, by focusing on “the bad stuff more than the good stuff.” She explains, “Because they didn’t show how, like, people was out there talking to the police, like, you know, having a conversation with them. You know, like, making sure that the police was okay. Like, there was actually people out there standing in front of the police, you know, kind of protecting them.”

From Toya’s perspective, the unrest also brought to light some larger issues for youth in Baltimore, which came through in her stories about her negative experiences with school, drugs and violence, and her desire to leave Baltimore. In describing the disruptive environment at school, Toya told us:

The teachers, I'm going to be honest with you, the teachers they, some of them don't know how to teach. Some of them don't know how to control the class. The work that we get, it's like, I feel like we should have been learned it. But, then the school, like, some of the people in the school, you know, you can't really learn in the classroom because it's people that it's in the background, in the back of the classroom, and want to be talking and disruptive and everything, you know? You can't learn, so, yeah, but high school is not fun.

Toya described her current neighborhood in Milton-Montford as “awful.” She shared that, “The shootings, drugs, and it’s just wretched around here. I’m going to be honest. It’s really, it’s really wretched and ghetto and loud and dirty.” Toya leaves the house for school, work, and to buy food, but other than that does not spend time anywhere else in the community. She told us that beyond leaving home for these essential activities, “It’s really nothing around here that I would, like, want to go to.” In order for Baltimore to improve, Toya believed the violence needed to end first, “Maybe, first...people stop killing, you know, people over drugs. ‘Cause that’s what it is mostly about. Drugs and money.”

Toya aspires to become a forensic scientist and plans to attend college after she graduates from Dunbar. With a flair for making lasagna, she also hopes to become a chef. Through a program at her school, she takes college preparatory courses at the University of Baltimore. However, she does not envision her career dreams coming to fruition in Baltimore.

I'm going to be honest, I don't like it here. Cause there's just too much violence, like, it's too much shootings, I just wouldn't want to raise my children in this environment. Not, no. I would want to go somewhere where I wouldn't have to worry about if I'm going to hear gun shots in the middle of the night or you know? ... I want to live in, like, Miami or something. Or, like, Atlanta.

While Toya has never been to Miami, she was steadfast about leaving Baltimore. When we asked where she'll be in ten years, she predicted, "I see myself with a house, with a degree, with a good job, maybe, like I said, in a Forensic force. Maybe with a child, married, married with a car. You know? And out of Baltimore."

In April 2015, amidst the unrest following the death of Freddie Gray, national and local media were quick to cast the youth in Baltimore as "thugs" and troublemakers. Coverage was particularly focused on tensions between youth and the police. Yet these media accounts were nearly devoid of the voices of youth themselves. In the months that followed, the *Hearing Their Voices* team at the Poverty and Inequality Research Lab at Johns Hopkins University conducted in-depth interviews with 58 young people between the ages of 15 and 24, drawn primarily from West Baltimore neighborhoods that were close to the heart of the unrest and also from areas on the city's southwest and east sides.¹ These youth told a far more nuanced and deeper story than media accounts reflect.

While the media reports seemed to suggest that youth participation in the unrest was widespread, the majority of the youth we spoke to spent the afternoon of April 27th simply trying to get home from school or work. Home is where most remained for the next several days as they sheltered in place, eyes glued to the television and their smartphones as they followed the events.

Though quick to affirm peaceful protests, these youth almost uniformly condemned the looting and were deeply disturbed by the property destruction that ensued, especially to businesses that served the community. Most were unimpressed by the city's response to the unrest. While recognized for their role in restoring order, the National Guard's presence was characterized as intimidating and even terrifying. Youth did not think school closings or the citywide curfew had much of an effect. They reserved their sharpest criticism for their Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, whom they saw as aloof and ineffectual.

The media depicted a highly antagonistic relationship between Baltimore youth and the police. However, most of the young people we spoke with expressed nuanced perspectives on law enforcement, and who often espoused the belief that a few bad apples don't spoil the whole bunch. Most said the unrest revealed tensions that went well beyond community-police relationships.

What the narratives of these young people reveal most clearly is their deep sense of abandonment by and exclusion from the city of Baltimore as a whole. The young people we spoke with feel disempowered, and believe that as a city, Baltimore has set them up for failure rather than success. Youth characterize Baltimore as devoid of meaningful economic opportunity, as a "drug city"—due to the dominance of drugs in the economic and social life of their communities—or as a "gun city" because of gun violence so endemic to their streets. Some feel it was unsafe to even attend a party—or school—without a weapon.

¹ This report is the result of a collaborative research by faculty and students at the Poverty and Inequality Research Lab (PIRL) at Johns Hopkins University. Monica Bell, Hana Clemens, Stefanie DeLuca, Brittany Dernberger, Kathryn Edin, and Allison Young all contributed to the writing of this report. Monica Bell was the project manager for the study, and fieldwork was conducted by Janice Bonsu, Kaitlin Edin-Nelson and Geena St. Andrew. Additional research assistance was provided by Meshay Clark, Steven Clapp, Mitchell Generette, Marika Miles, Daveona Ransome, Larry Robinson, and Trinard Sharpe. Tim Nelson and Phil Garboden also provided feedback on the report.

Yet the most common grievance—expressed by nearly every youth in the study—was the institutional abandonment of their neighborhoods—the lack of safe public spaces, recreation centers, and programs oriented toward youth development and their futures. Youth took this as evidence that Baltimore itself had abandoned them. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that not one of the 58 youth in this study saw their future in Baltimore. Many told us they aspired to live anywhere other than in Baltimore City.

While a sobering account of the lives of Baltimore’s youth, their stories and their insights also provide inspiration and signify the incredible potential of Baltimore’s young people. We view the findings in this report as a powerful and clear directive for the city’s leaders to act swiftly to improve the prospects of a generation of youth who are eager to find their futures.

METHODOLOGY

To capture youths’ voices, we recruited a racially- and ethnically-diverse interview team, most in their late teens and early twenties. Team members included three PIs and four undergraduate university students who were extensively trained for this work. Especially vital to our work were seven young “community interns” recruited from the neighborhoods studied, following best practices of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Together, community interns, university students, and PIs formulated the study, built the interview guide, pretested and refined questions, recruited subjects, and conducted interviews. This method insured that youth voices permeated every aspect of the research.

The youth we studied were drawn from some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Baltimore City. Most lived in the West Baltimore neighborhoods of Upton/Druid Heights, Sandtown/Winchester, Penn North, and Mondawmin, but also Park Heights (Northwest Baltimore), Morrell Park, (Southwest Baltimore) and several disadvantaged neighborhoods on the city’s east side. Most lived in census tracts with poverty rates exceeding 30 or even 40 percent, placing them among the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the nation. At the request of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, our primary funder, we intentionally recruited a subsample of participants who were especially disadvantaged; they met the definition of “disconnected”—neither working nor in school. Disconnected youth constituted just over a third of our sample.

Though precise response rates are difficult to calculate when deploying mixed-mode door-to-door and “street recruitment” (approaching youth in public places, such as the Mondawmin Mall), youth who were approached for participation in the study and met the study criteria were usually eager to participate; in fact, we had more volunteers than we could accommodate. We estimate a response rate of between 75 and 90 percent.

Fifty-eight young women and men participated in the study, spending hours with our interviewers sharing their experiences and views. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription firm. All were coded by a single, experienced coder (obviating the need for inter-coder reliability checks) using a detailed coding template derived from the interview guide and from themes that emerged from the interviews themselves.

The majority of the youth were African American (86%), seven were white (12%), and one was Hispanic (2%) (see Table 1). Young men slightly outnumbered young women (57% versus 43%). Adolescents (15-17 years), emerging adults (18-21), and young adults (22-24) were represented in about equal numbers. As noted earlier, most youth were from West Baltimore (57%). Five were homeless, and one did not provide a home address.

Table 1. Summary of Respondent Demographics

Race			
Black	(50)	86%	
White	(7)	12%	
Hispanic	(1)	2%	
Gender			
Female	(25)	43%	
Male	(33)	57%	
Age			
15-17	(18)	31%	
18-21	(20)	35%	
22-24	(20)	35%	
Neighborhood			
West Baltimore ²	(33)	57%	
East Baltimore ³	(9)	16%	
Southwest Baltimore ⁴	(5)	9%	
Northeast Baltimore ⁵	(4)	7%	
Central Baltimore ⁶	(1)	2%	
Homeless	(5)	9%	
Data missing	(1)	2%	

FINDINGS

The Unrest

Baltimore's Mayor and the U.S. President described youth participating in the so-called "riot" as "thugs." Media accounts may have created the impression that participation in the events of April 27th was widespread, yet, as the opening vignette suggests, the majority of the youth we spoke to were not involved in the public protests or in the looting and property destruction. Instead, most scrambled to find a safe way home as they left school and work on the afternoon of April 27th. Home is where most remained for the next several days, watching the events on television and their phones, just like the rest of the country.

² Upton, Park Heights, Sandtown, Reservoir Hill, Mondawmin, Penn North

³ Perkins Homes, Latrobe Homes, Milton-Montford, Barclay

⁴ Morrell Park, Carroll Park

⁵ Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello, Clifton Park

⁶ Charles Village

Gathering at the Mall

Many youth described how calls to meet at the Mondawmin Mall emerged on Instagram and Facebook in the days and hours leading up to the confrontation between youth and the police at there. Most were unsure about the intent of the gathering. Some were under the impression that it was a call to gather for a peaceful protest. Some believe gang members instigated the event. A few assumed it would be an opportunity to “purge” the Mall.

Sixteen-year-old Tamonica⁷ was one of the few of the sampled youth who were on-site, and described the confusion she observed: “You had people there that were trying to do a peaceful protest and then you had the ones that weren’t.” Neveah⁸, age 15, was drawn to the Mall because she thought the purge was supposed to be:

...a regular protest.... It was supposed to be us just standing up there, just facing the police and really just stand up there, like have a regular protest, and we was just going to walk around for real, we’re like, “Justice for Freddie Gray,” just standing up there but then it turned into all this stealing.

Taylor⁹, 19, also believed that the purpose of the gathering at the Mall was peaceful protest: “Nobody was worried about looting anything, they just wanted to protest...and make the police mad. That’s what they wanted to do, [have a] peaceful protest.” Taylor said that it was presence of cops “lined up” in riot gear at the Mall that led to the unrest: “When they were still peaceful protesting, you still had people saying it was the cops lined up, saying it was the cops...just trying to make them mad.”

No matter the interpreted meaning of the protest, few chose to join in. Most who were in the area—those from schools nearby or whose route home took them through the Mondawmin Transit Center—cleared it as quickly as possible after leaving school, heading directly home. Parents, coaches, probation officers, and friends had also heard about the plan to gather at the Mall and urged youth to return home, citing the risk of arrest and the worry that any protest would get out of hand.

Getting Home

Due to rumors of a protest at the Mall, some schools closed early so students could get home safely before events unfolded. Yet all public transit serving the area was shut down, leaving many stranded. Worried about their children’s safety, parents and other adults mobilized to find ways of getting their children home. Most were picked up by car by a family member or a friend’s parent. Others received repeated text messages and phone calls from parents stuck at work, trying to arrange a way for them to get home. For example, Toya¹⁰, age 16, told us,

... When everything started, it, we was getting out of school [and I didn’t have a way home]. And my friend was like, “Oh, my mother just called and she said that she was going to come pick us up and take us home,” because you know, they planning on, they was planning on going down, the gang people, the Bloods and the Cripps, they was planning on shooting up the police down there,

⁷ African American, resident of Milton-Montford in East Baltimore

⁸ African American, resident of Edmonson Village in West Baltimore

⁹ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

¹⁰ African American, resident of Milton-Montford in East Baltimore

where the children was. So, you know, she took us home and, like, I went straight to the TV and I watched what was going on.

Basketball coaches and even probation officers urged and sometimes demanded that their players and probationers go home. Eighteen-year old Ray¹¹ explained how his Probation Officer warned him to stay home for his own safety. “I wasn't [about to be] out there. I was on probation. I had gotten a phone call from my Probation Officer.... She said I couldn't be out there. If I was to get pulled over, I was going to go to jail so I couldn't even go out there,” he said. Similarly, 16-year old Jessica¹² recalled:

I was scared. My grandmother told me stay my butt in here because I was in enough trouble with the juvenile thing. I was not [about to be] doing nothing [like that]. I was not going to jail. I'm not trying—yo no—[I'm on] probation! I was not trying to do none of that. I stayed home with my grandmother and watched the news right with her.

Sheltering In Place

After making it home, these young people often spent the next several days holed up at home watching events unfold, accessing information from social media, the television, and radio. Emma¹³, age 17, who lived in the Mondawmin area, related that she got information about the events unfolding outside her door by, “... watching it at home. And it was on Instagram, there was a lot of videos. It was local Baltimore people rapping about it and stuff.”

Mitchell,¹⁴ a 24-year-old homeless youth who was visiting his half-siblings in McElderry Park at the time, admitted he was somewhat tempted to join in the looting due to an acute need for a new pair of shoes. He stayed inside because he was convinced that looters would eventually be apprehended.

No. I stayed in the house. No, no, no because my sister, brother and I were joking, “Man I could have got some shoes man!” I needed some new shoes and I could have gotten some. But no, no because again, remember like a week after, there were like 200 people locked up. You were on camera and not even just store cameras, they has a helicopter taping everybody! I'm ambitious but I'm not stupid! I've got things to do next week, I'm not trying to be in jail trying to figure out when a freedom fighter's going to come and help us get out.

Ashley¹⁵, age 17, shared a similar view, “I don't want to get into trouble. I had my fun when I was younger and I [now] leave it behind. Stealing from the liquor store won't [help me]. That's how I look at it. I'd just rather work for it than steal it.”

Mitchell, who has a felony conviction, explained that his focus was on making sure family—particularly his mother—was safe,

¹¹ African American, unknown place of residence

¹² African American, resident of Woodbrook/Reservoir Hill in West Baltimore

¹³ African American

¹⁴ African American, homeless

¹⁵ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

... so I was not involved in any of it and just made sure that people were safe. When the [protesters] went over by Johns Hopkins, of course I made sure mom [was safe], because she lives right down the street from Johns Hopkins. I didn't want anything to happen so I just made sure everybody was safe.

Why Freddie Gray?

Many noted that deaths as a result of police brutality have been occurring for some time, and expressed surprise that it was Freddie Gray's death that became the flashpoint leading to unrest. Ashley¹⁶, age 17, thought it is due to the fact that unlike others, Gray's arrest was caught on camera: "I think like it had been happening way before, but I think Freddie Gray brought it to the public eye because it was [caught] on camera so it was like more noticeable and people could back it up. There was more evidence."

Tamonica¹⁷ believed that it was because Gray was unusually well-connected in the community.

The [rioters] were just upset, but it's like, it was more people killed than just Freddie Gray, so why did you all of a sudden just get upset? I think he was probably in a gang and he had a lot of friends and family. But it's like it was a lot of black boys and black people that were killed by police officers and you all didn't do that for them.

Taylor¹⁸, age 19, wondered whether Freddie Gray's death wasn't simply the last straw.

Yeah people are tired, they're tired of the same thing keep happening. They're tired of the cops killing children and, and, and young men and women, and getting away with it. So yeah, now they reached a breaking point, for where they say okay, our voices aren't being heard, so we want to act on it.

Many youth echo Taylor's sentiments. Jayden¹⁹, age 20, said:

No, like, I ain't gonna say it was for Freddie Gray, it just—people got tired. Like we was to the point of no return, like [the police] pushed us to the edge... People just got tired of the nonsense because [the police] be doing illegal stuff all the time, like they walk in people's houses illegally and search things, like they, they don't got no boundaries, like they really don't care...

According to Jayden, "People just stop caring [when the police treat people like that]. For them few hours, people did not give a fuck what was going on. Like they didn't care if they went to jail or not, like, it was crazy."

Peaceful Protests versus Looting and Property Destruction

Though most chose to follow the events from the safety of their homes, nearly all expressed deep empathy with peaceful protesters, citing deep, long-running, tensions with the police. However,

¹⁶ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

¹⁷ African American, resident of Milton-Montford in East Baltimore

¹⁸ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

¹⁹ African American, resident of Reservoir Hill/Woodbrook in West Baltimore

all but one condemned the looting and property destruction. The young people we spoke with drew a sharp distinction between the peaceful protests, which many feel brought the black community together, and looting and destruction of property. Yet, in their view, the peaceful protests had limited influence, both because they drew scant media attention and because they believe that prospects are low that such actions lead to meaningful change.

Youth overwhelmingly rejected the idea that the looting and property destruction that erupted on April 27th were in direct response to—or justified by—Freddie Gray’s death. Nineteen-year-old Taylor²⁰ told us: “They wasn’t thinking of it as in...the Freddie Gray thing. [They] was kind of like, ‘Okay, we’ve got an open opportunity [to get free things], let’s take advantage of it.’”

Yet Taylor also recognized the role of tensions that had been building in the days leading up to April 27th. “People were rowdied up. So when you’re angry, you’re going to get yourself into anything, you just want to find something that you can do that’s destructive, because you’re angry.” Destiny²¹, age 18, agreed: “...the rioting happened because kids are young and dumb and they were reckless, like if you don’t give him [Freddie Gray] justice we’ll just wreck the city up.” Ashley²², age 17, shares similar views. “I just think...everybody mad. I think that they just got all this energy, and they just felt unstoppable so they started breaking walls down and broke the walls down, ‘I might as well take this.’ So that’s why they’re just taking stuff.”

While a few young people acknowledged that some of the looting may have been motivated by economic need (i.e. diapers and toilet paper), most pointed to opportunism as the cause. As Destiny explained, “To be honest I think it was just something to do at the time, especially for kids my age. If you’re rioting and taking from your own community..., you just don’t realize what you’re doing. It’s like everybody crushed my heart because it’s like when I watched them break into the hair store – I was just like, I mean – and get on top of people’s cars. I’m like [those are] people’s cars! Get off! People work hard for that store for you to be breaking it. I was hurt.”

Youth also understood how tensions might have boiled over because people were “fed up” with the police. According to 19-year-old Kelly²³:

I think it was about people being fed up. I think it was about being tired and being emotional and it’s gotten to a point where as a whole, as in anybody, as an individual, you can go through a situation with a person and not say anything and become fed up and lash out. ... [It’s] unacceptable like pertaining to police brutality and all of that, like just unacceptable.

Tamonica²⁴, age 16, was unsure of the exact reasons why the unrest occurred, but offered the following guess: “I guess they was just fed up with a lot of black boys being killed, but I honestly don’t know. I don’t know why, all of a sudden, they just decided that they wanted to throw the riot.”

In every case but one, youth said they refrained from participating in the looting and destruction of property on April 27th and in the days that followed. In a passing nod to the fact that in some cases the looting may have been driven by economic need, 18 year old Destiny explained, “... I’m not going to take anything – I don’t need to take anything. I really don’t need... Especially snacks and Brazilian hair? I don’t need for any of that!” Similarly, 16-year-old Keisha²⁵ tells us,

²⁰ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

²¹ African American, resident of Dunbar Broadway in East Baltimore

²² African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

²³ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

²⁴ African American, resident of Milton Montford in East Baltimore

²⁵ African American, resident of Shipley Hill in West Baltimore’s

I don't need to steal. No, for real, like I don't need to steal. My momma can buy me everything I asked for. Like if I ask for anything right now, I know she could be like, "Yeah, you got it." It's going to take me like two or three days for me to get it, but you, there's no, it's coming, you got it. That's all right. And I can get a pair of shoes any day. A new outfit any day, I don't need to steal from nowhere.

Destruction of Local Community

Youth were saddened, dismayed, and sharply critical of the fact that the unrest destroyed vital institutions in their community that served local residents, such as the few stores in the area where locals could buy groceries and get prescriptions filled. Many wondered why—if the true motivation for the riots was frustration with police—rioters did not target the Western-District police station. Brianna²⁶, age 18, offered that very critique.

When they did the protest, march up and down the street, I said, 'So [yeah,] Freddie Gray and Black Lives Matter.' When they came to mess up the malls and stuff, I don't think that was for Freddie Gray. That was for people who just want get stuff, really. I think it was dumb because it was like, why would y'all sit up here and mess up your own community? Y'all still can't say the police mess up our community and messing up our black people, but why would y'all sit up here and mess up your community. Y'all need to go to the police stations and mess their place up and these courts and all that, but y'all want to mess up y'all own hood.

Seventeen-year-old Jasmine²⁷ complained, "... they're trying to say the riot was a Freddie Gray riot. No it's wasn't. ... A guy's death leads into you into robbing stores for no apparent reason?" Nevaeh²⁸, age 15, agrees:

...I don't understand that either because Freddie Gray, okay, he is not the only person that the police beat up. And black kills black every day and [the public] don't make no big fuss about it.... At the end of the day..., burning stuff down ain't gonna bring [Freddie Gray] back.

Jasmine described why she did not choose to express her anger in this way, and the alternatives she believed angry youth could have pursued—avenues she believed would have been more productive.

I didn't want to participate because that was just the wrong way to go about it. It was. All of y'all could have done something simple. Write a bunch of letters and flood them with letters and stuff like that downtown forcing them to do something. Like y'all could have did something. Protests. Y'all could have did a petition. Y'all could have did so much instead of snatching stuff out of stores acting like a bunch of wild fools.

Parents Held Accountable

Youth did not hesitate to hold looters' parents accountable. Toya Graham, the mother who became famous after the video of her pulling her son out of the crowd at Mondawmin Mall, went

²⁶ African American, resident of Central Park Heights/Lucille Park in West Baltimore

²⁷ African American, resident of Reservoir Hill in West Baltimore

²⁸ African American, resident of Edmonson Village in West Baltimore

viral, was frequently offered up as an example more parents should follow. Tamonica²⁹, age 16, believed that, "... [Toya Graham, the mother in the video] done good. All the parents should have been out there, but sadly, half the parents were out there with their kids, rioting and stealing. I agree with what she did."

Taylor³⁰, age 19, praised two mothers she knows, who, after discovering their sons were participating in the looting, "...immediately reacted. They got their children, 'You don't, this is, this is, you ain't never do this, you don't do stuff like this.' Like they were ...disciplining them."

The Official Response

The National Guard, activated by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan in response to the unrest, had a chilling effect on these youth. Many compared the images of National Guard troops outfitted with automatic rifles and tanks rolling down residential streets to violent video games—the experience literally felt surreal. Troy³¹, age 21, explained, "Like I – I – I don't feel safe with the regular police, so I *definitely* didn't feel safer with the National Guard!" Yet in contrast, some, like Toya, were initially frightened, but ultimately comforted by the presence of the National Guard, "... I was a little scared, 'cause them big guns that they had. But I know they wasn't going to do nothing. They was there to protect us..."

There were mixed reactions to the curfew and school closings as well. Some felt these efforts were protective, but many believed they were "lame," with limited, or even deleterious, impact. Taylor³², age 19, commented, "I felt like, why close the school? When you know there's a bunch of kids that's out here looting. Why not put them in school? And it makes it easier for you to identify who is out in the street, and who's in the school building." Neveah³³, age 15, thought the schools should have remained open for different reasons. She noted, "I was so heated about that – we were so behind and then everybody want to be complaining about how behind we were." Neveah offered further reason she believes the schools should have remained open: "Kids need breakfast. [The Mayor] should know this."

Neveah also criticized the curfew: "... at the end of the day, the curfew, it was pointless. The things that [the Mayor] was pulling was not working!" Toya, on the other hand, expressed ambivalence: "And I didn't understand that 'cause, like I said, people need to go to work, and they go to work in the wee hours of the morning sometimes, so, but I mean, it did keep the neighborhoods quiet, so, you know. It was kind of a good thing."

Youth leveled their harshest criticism against Mayor Rawlings-Blake for what they perceive as her scapegoating of youth and her lack of effective leadership during the unrest. Brianna³⁴, age 18, exclaimed:

We need a new mayor! She just don't do right for us really. With the whole Freddie Gray situation, I feel like she could've been handling it more than what she is. Like I said, I think she took it out more so on the teenagers and stuff. Ain't no teenagers kill Freddie Gray! This was grown-up—grown people that killed Freddie Gray. [Why call us thugs?]

²⁹ African American, resident of Milton-Montford in East Baltimore

³⁰ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

³¹ African American, currently homeless

³² African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

³³ African American, resident of Edmonson Village in West Baltimore

³⁴ African American resident of Central Park Heights/Lucille Park in West Baltimore

Many, like Ashley³⁵, age 17, saw the Mayor as aloof and uninvolved.

I think she should be more involved and more active, because ... when the whole riot and stuff that was going on, she was talking [about doing things]. But what about after the riots? The killings still didn't drop down. ... The police still not right, like they still be doing crooked cop stuff. I think she should just be a lot more active with the city because we barely even see her. I think she should be more involved with her city.

Toya concurred: “[The Mayor] was kind of nonchalant about it. ‘Oh, I’m just [going to] do this and maybe this will work.’ ... I don’t think that she, I don’t for real even think that she even cared. She’s just there to be there.”

One comment made by Mayor Rawlings-Blake was noted repeatedly: that the rioters were “thugs.” Almost all are sharply critical of her choice of words. Toya was outraged that a white man who committed a mass murder—a reference to Dylann Roof, a white 21-year-old who killed nine people at a church in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015—was spared that designation.

Right. I don't think, how was that us being thugs, though? Like, I don't get it. It's not—they is breaking in stores or whatever and they doing dumb stuff, but is that being thuggish, really? I don't get how they call us thugs but it's people, like, the person that went in that church and shot up them people. How is he not a thug? Just because he's white? I think he did that because we're black and it's [a] stereotype – a whole bunch of stereotype stuff. And yeah, they just do that because they're known, I guess we're known for doing all that stuff that thugs do.

Destiny³⁶, age 18, noted the irony she sees in that same contrast:

It really hurt my feelings that they called us thugs. I saw a video on that too.... They didn't [call] the other man who killed like nine people [a thug]. It was just – that's just really crazy.... Then they called us thugs. But we were rioting because they killed so many of us, because there was no justice.

Distorted Media Coverage

Many of the youth complained about what they felt was distorted media coverage, focused almost solely on the mayhem at the intersection of Pennsylvania and North Avenues. They decried the lack of coverage of positive actions they observed, such as neighbors helping neighbors, or those joining in peaceful protests.

Many of our youth expressed dismay that the peaceful protests and other positive events did not receive more media coverage. Toya explained:

I think it [the protests] helped a little bit. It brought people together, you know, to talk about how they really feel.... Overall, it was, I think it was cool to see that. You know? I think the media, I think they showed the bad stuff more than the good stuff. Because they didn't show how, like, people was out there talking to the police, like, you know, having a conversation with them. You know, like, making sure that the police was okay. Like, there was actually people out there standing in front of the police, you know, kind of protecting them.

³⁵ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

³⁶ African American, resident of Dunbar Broadway in East Baltimore

Twenty-one-year-old Million³⁷ noted, “I feel like the way the press handled it was wrong. They painted the picture to be so much uglier than it was. . . . Y’all could have had it be like that stuff, didn’t show some of the peaceful, positive actions taking place.” Ashley³⁸, age 17, agreed.

...because [on] TV, they were trying to [make it] seem like everybody that was out there was doing bad and stuff. But it was the people out there that were trying to clean up the mess and stuff like that. [There were] people that wasn’t even participating or kids that wasn’t even participating. They were still trying to clean up and stuff, trying to tell other teenagers to just go home. Like, why you wanna do this? Why do you have to mess up your own city, you still live here?

Emma³⁹, also 17, put it this way: “I think the news was making us look bad, like they wasn’t doing right, like they was talking to the crazy...looked like they was talking to the crazy people.”

Police-Community Tensions the Tip of the Iceberg: Institutional Abandonment

The Police

While the media depicted a highly antagonistic relationship between Baltimore youth and the police, most youth had more nuanced views. However, this does not mean that youth are not critical of police behavior. Sixteen-year-old Toya explained:

I feel as though the whole situation [with Freddie Gray] was wrong. The way that people, like, reacted to it [by looting] was wrong, too... But, the whole situation, at least brought light, it at least brought the media to a situation and, like, let people know what was going on because it’s a lot of that happening in Baltimore... White and black, they mistreating these people just because they got a badge. Like, I don’t get that. You supposed to be here to protect me, not to hurt me.

Jimmy⁴⁰, who is 24, white, and from a working-class neighborhood that is in sharp decline, was similarly disgusted with the behavior of the police.

You walk around at night, they stop you and you don’t have your ID, they’ll lock you up which is fucking bullshit, ruin your night, going into alley will do that. They harass you, they talk to you like you’re piece of shit. Police down here they think everybody’s a fucking junkie. I don’t know, it’s fucking [crazy]. I hate them all, and they have this thing called the jump out squad? Have you ever heard of the jump out squad? Never heard of them? ... They are, they are essentially cops riding around in regular vehicles, like Toyota Corollas or like Honda Civics and shit like that, all tinted out, that you wouldn’t suspect to be a cop car, watching for drug deals to happen or anything to happen and then they all jump out of the car and chase you down, and they just pummel you and lock you up.

³⁷ African American, resident of Mondawmin in West Baltimore

³⁸ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

³⁹ African American, resident of Mondawmin in West Baltimore

⁴⁰ Resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

Destiny⁴¹, age 18, told us that when she was young, she “used to idolize the police and I used to be like, ‘Oh can I be like you when I grow up? What is it that you do?’ Asking them a whole bunch of questions.” She then described a pivotal event that changed that view.

I was talking to them, asking them a bunch of questions like how [I] could be a police, this that and the third. I was a serious young lady. Then that’s when my mother was like, “Get over here! Get over here! Get over here girl!” and I was like, “What did I do?” She was like, “Who told you to talk to them? They can do anything to you. They can take you and kill you.” I was like, “They’re police why would they just take me and kill me?”

Twenty-four-year-old George⁴² shared an event that had a similar impact. He claimed it was common for students in his schools to bring small weapons, such as brass knuckles or a knife. After a particularly violent episode, metal detectors were installed and police officers began to search students when they arrived. Shortly thereafter, George had the following interaction with an officer:

She pat me down and she was like, “Open your legs.” I opened my legs and she grabbed my balls and squeezed. “You better not say nothing.” Tears coming to my eyes and she ran my pockets because at the time, I wasn’t selling but I was holding. She just took it out [of] my pockets and she’s [threatening], “If you scream I’m going to pull this out.” ... I never had a good experience with a cop [after that].

Yet most youth, such as 18-year-old Destiny,⁴³ held a more nuanced view.

I felt bad for the police though, when they were rioting. They were throwing bricks at the police cars and all this other stuff, and like, “F the police.” First of all, you’re going to need them. Second of all, every police officer is not bad. Because I know if my son grows up to be a police officer I don’t want anybody throwing a brick at his head like they did that man ... He’s got to live too. He’s got to eat too and if he wanted to be a police officer that doesn’t mean every police officer is bad. But some of them have to go.

Michelle⁴⁴, who was 23, concurred. She believed that,

...some [are] good and some [are] bad... We just don’t know which ones is what. ... Yep, they there to protect and serve. All of them ain’t like that. So I mean that’s just like one apple spoiling the bunch. You got to figure out do you want to throw the whole bunch away or just get the spoiled apples out, or you going to stop eating apples because of one rotten apple? Try it again.

At this point in the conversation, Michelle paused, then continued: “[Or maybe] go get another bushel of apples!”

Deeper Tensions: Institutional Abandonment

Police community tensions were only the piece of a much deeper story about the relationship between these youth and their city. The young people we spoke with felt disempowered to a striking degree. As the title of this report implies, they believed that as a city, Baltimore has set

⁴¹ African American, resident of Dunbar Broadway in East Baltimore

⁴² African American, resident of the Hollins Market neighborhood in West Baltimore

⁴³ African American, resident of Dunbar Broadway in East Baltimore

⁴⁴ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

them up for failure rather than success. Youth characterized Baltimore as devoid of meaningful economic opportunity. Many referred to it as a “drug city”—due to the dominance of drugs in the economic and social life of their communities—or as a “gun city” because of gun violence so endemic to their streets. Some felt it was unsafe to even attend a party—or school—without a weapon.

Many decried the lack of youth-focused programs and institutions—especially recreation centers—in the city that could have provided compelling alternatives for those youth who got caught up in the mayhem. This was a grievance expressed by nearly every youth in the study. Young people pointed to the lack of safe public spaces, recreation centers, and programs oriented toward youth development as evidence that Baltimore itself had abandoned them. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that not one of the 58 youth in this study saw their future in Baltimore. Many told us they aspired to live anywhere other than in Baltimore City.

When asked what daily life was like in Baltimore, Jeremiah⁴⁵, age 21, replied:

You see people standing on the corner. People fighting. People getting beat up. People getting stabbed. People getting killed. You just become accustomed. A lot of people become stagnant or depressed about what they see. So I guess when they go somewhere else it's like, "Wow, this is how it can be?"

Theirs is not simply a story about frustration over community-police relations; youth felt that the city itself is against them. Youth decried the lack of “decent” schools and meaningful economic opportunity, the absence of youth-focused community programs, a lack of safe public space where they can spend time with friends and just “be,” and—especially—the lack of recreation centers.⁴⁶ Twenty-year-old Jayden⁴⁷ offered a particularly powerful critique, describing Baltimore as “setup city. They set it up for you to fail.”

Schools

For many, disenchantment with the city started in the schools. Warren⁴⁸, age 23, felt that Baltimore’s schools teach “you the wrong information [for jobs].” Twenty-one-year old Troy⁴⁹ believed much of what was taught when he was in school was irrelevant and that schools should instead, “teach how to survive, because you can know all the numbers in the world, but if you don’t know how to use them, it’s completely pointless. ... It’s just unnecessary information.” He aptly summed up the view many others have of school, saying, “I think that’s what a lot of children think school is: it’s just a place to be while your parents are at home. ... You’re just gone there every morning.”

Schools were characterized as places where “kids walk the halls” during class and teachers “just want a paycheck.” They are also frequently places where kids experience violence—at the hands of youth and adults alike. Twenty-two-year-old Tiana⁵⁰ explained how, in response to fighting in her school, “the police were spraying mace through the hallways and stuff, so it made me not

⁴⁵ African American, resident of Beechfield in Southwest Baltimore

⁴⁶ <http://www.cphabaltimore.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Recreation-Center-White-Paper-as-of-2.3.141.pdf>

⁴⁷ African American, resident of Reservoir Hill/Woodbrook in West Baltimore

⁴⁸ African American, currently homeless

⁴⁹ African American, currently homeless

⁵⁰ African American, resident of Madison Park in West Baltimore

even want to come.” Twenty-two year-old Sierra⁵¹ described her school as “rough.” She too mentioned a time when security guards responded to a gang fight by spraying the lobby with mace: “So imagine... just trying to go to class... but getting maced.” She sums up her experiences there in the following way: “it wasn’t a good school; it was a bad school.”

No Jobs, only Drugs and Guns

The link between a lack of opportunity in the formal economy and the experience of drugs and violence was a prevalent theme in our conversations. Toya said Baltimore “is mostly about drugs and money.” Drugs dominate both neighborhood and economic life—so much so that several respondents explicitly describe Baltimore as a “drug city.” Toya explained, “If people wasn’t so hooked on drugs in the city, then maybe it would be decent. But, this city is a drug city, like, it’s all about drugs.”

Some also characterized it as a “gun city,” referring to the frequent gun violence they witness on the streets of their communities. Some even felt that they have to carry a gun in order to leave the house. Ray, age 18, explained:

And nowadays—everybody says this—if you're somewhere where I can't bring my gun, it ain't meant for me to be there. That's how real it is. If somebody can't bring a gun with them, they're not going. So 9 out of 10 people ain't going to a lot of parties. There are a lot of places people ain't going because people feel as though they can't bring their gun. A lot of people won't even go to school because they can't bring a weapon in school. Being in school, you're just surrounded by a whole bunch of people from different hoods.

Youth deplored the fact that in neighborhoods starved of jobs, drugs have become the most expedient way to earn an income. Rhiannon⁵², an 18-year-old, explained:

Everything revolves around money and if you don't make enough, then you're behind and the easiest way to make money is drugs. If I'm selling heroin on the street, I'm making three times your paycheck and three times his paycheck, like – and that's what kids look at, and when they look at that, it's just like, I can make my parents' paycheck. I can make my parents' paycheck.

Ray,⁵³ also 18, said that young people often get pulled into the drug trade just to help their parents pay the bills, but then find themselves trapped.

So all your money is going on trying to pay a bill, trying to at least pay a light bill or something, trying to help out with something. That's why a lot of people get manipulated to doing stuff they don't want to do, or a person with a gutter ass future, you can see them on the corner selling drugs. He started off to help his mother, now he's thinking it ain't nothing else he can do.

Some youth had found themselves turning to the street as a way to literally survive. Twenty-four-year-old George⁵⁴ explained:

⁵¹ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

⁵² Caucasian, resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

⁵³ African American, unknown place of residence

⁵⁴ African American, resident of the Hollins Market neighborhood in West Baltimore

When I was robbing people, there was a reason why I was doing it. My stomach was literally growling, nothing to do. Either I die, starve or I do something. I was too young for a job. I mean I cut grass during the summer. I shoveled snow through the winter. But do you do in between?

Rodrigo⁵⁵, 18 and white, was angry that the unrest has been characterized as a racial instead of an economic issue.

If I was out here [participating in the protests or riots], though, I'd have been screaming at people about how fucking stupid they are for making this a black versus white thing. ... It's not because you're black or because you're white that you're getting picked on, it's because we're low-income residents of a fucking low-income city.

Double Disadvantage: Being Low Income in a Low-Income City

Like Rodrigo, many youth pointed to the fact that the city is without adequate revenue to provide needed services to its citizens. Ashley⁵⁶, age 17, described how the economic challenges the city faces impinge on the ability of poor youth to escape the confines of their neighborhood, or even eat.

Taxes going up, the bus [to] school [going] up—they talking about [things] we got to pay for out of our own money. The bus is \$4 now. I think slowly but surely everything will just go up [and it's going to hurt us]. Like you can't not use the bus if you don't have a car, like you need some sort of transportation. Or like food taxes and stuff like, you can't just not eat—you're going to have to eat. There's going to be stuff like you really need and that you really got to pay for.

At age 17, the ability to afford transportation and food were pressing worries for Ashley. Like her, many of our youth experienced fragile economic situations at home. The lack of community-level resources—being a “low-income city” as Rodrigo said—adds to the burden these youth face.

Nothing to Do

Many youth hoped that the unrest had created a silver lining—a “moment” for Baltimore that might have the potential to prompt change—though they often express some bitterness that only now have people begun to care. Taylor⁵⁷, age 19, reflected, “... it's so big in the media now, everyone wants to care. I don't, don't like that. Because I feel like, no, no where were you before, it's been happening for years. Where were you at?”

Yet repeatedly, these young people noted there is “nothing to do” for youth in Baltimore. They wanted places where they can engage with other youth in “positive” activities—places like recreation centers, pools, and skateboard parks. They wanted youth-oriented programs where they can “develop” and “improve.” They yearned for opportunities to earn a living outside of the drug trade. And they longed for exposure to a wider world outside of their neighborhoods and their city.

⁵⁵ Caucasian, resident of the Poppleton neighborhood in West Baltimore

⁵⁶ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

⁵⁷ African American, resident of Upton in West Baltimore

Twenty-four-year-old Ebony⁵⁸ said that if she could do anything to change Baltimore, “I would put more um, things to do. People need things to do.” She wanted “...more programs and stuff like that. I would [get involved in programs] if it’s going to help me build.” Nathan⁵⁹, age 18, expressed similar sentiments.

I mean I think stuff goes on because like the kids and the teenagers here—there’s no outlet—like there’s no activities or nothing to do here.... It’s nothing that the kids can do like around here. Like you see—like I play football, right. That’s what like saved me for real.... You don’t got nowhere for the kids to go and learn stuff, learn how to do stuff—I mean, even learn what they like to do.

Troy,⁶⁰ a 21-year-old, reflected:

We realized that, as children, we didn’t even have recreational centers, we didn’t have, we didn’t have anything to do during the day. Like—we got into fights and things because that’s—we—we had so much energy as kids, but it was nothing to put towards. We didn’t have people to say, “Well we got a football team over here, we going to start a football team,” or, “We got....” We didn’t have those type of resources.

Twenty-four-year-old Jimmy⁶¹ offered a similar diagnosis.

When I was a kid, I didn’t have shit to do around here, I walked around the streets all the time, me and a friend were just getting into trouble and shoplifting candy from stores and shit like that, like just being little knuckleheads like because we had nothing to do.... Definitely I’d make something for the kids to do, because that’s why these kids are getting into what they’re getting into.

Rhiannon⁶², age 18, agreed: “There’s not enough people—there’s not enough resources to give people the stuff that they need to create themselves to where they need to make themselves, to make the youth better.”

Recreation centers were often offered up as a prime example of institutional abandonment. Whereas some 130 such centers existed in the city in the 1970s and early 80, the number began declining after that. By 1991, 76 centers remained in operation. Six years later, only 60 remained. In 2013, the city ran 55 centers, but 15 have closed since. Currently, 40 centers are operational, along with 5 run by the school district and 7 by private organizations.

Rhiannon⁶³ believed the need for the city to invest in its youth is especially acute due to the intergenerational nature of the disadvantage experienced in so many Baltimore neighborhoods. “It’s really just like, the first generation messed up, which messed up the second generation, messed up the third generation, and it just goes down like that. And the more generations get messed up, the more the kids mess it up, and it gets worse.” Like Rhiannon, many felt the pull of family

⁵⁸ African American, resident of Lexington in West Baltimore

⁵⁹ African American, resident of the Mondawmin/Easterwood area in West Baltimore

⁶⁰ African American, currently homeless

⁶¹ Caucasian, resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

⁶² Caucasian, resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

⁶³ Caucasian, resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

disadvantage, which they feel lends a special fragility to the lives of youth in their neighborhoods. For example, Jay⁶⁴, 20 years old, thought that,

...most kids end up in jail or dead because they are so caught up in the streets. It's because their mother is either addicted to crack cocaine or heroin. They're just out in the streets all the time. ... They basically raise their selves from there on out. They don't have role models – well, their role models are their old heads, [gang members and drug dealers], for real. And they follow them. Whatever they do, they going to do because they have nobody else to teach them what's right.... Some individuals can't help it. Some are just born into this lifestyle, for real, and it's hard to get out of it and be honest. The only way out of it is either in a jail cell or in a box, to be completely honest. Sad to say, but it's the truth.

I See My Future Outside the City

Despite their hopes for the city, when asked where they see themselves in two, five, or ten years, all of the youth in this study planned to leave Baltimore and, often, the State of Maryland. Some even intended to leave the country.

Twenty-two-year-old Sierra⁶⁵ explained, “Who wants to live in the hood for the rest of their life? Nobody. I want to move to [Baltimore County] where so it's nice, it's quiet. It's a little bit safer, but things will happen out there too.” Beyond these pull factors, she pointed to powerful push factors as well:

I don't think that nobody has really responded [to the unrest], if you ask me. Like streets are still the streets. They said they were going to get the drugs off the street. The drugs are still on the streets. It's not getting any better. It's getting worse. So I don't think nobody is trying to put forth an effort to do anything.

Bobby⁶⁶, age 23, wanted to leave Baltimore—and the state—because of the drugs. “I should just go away. Just go to a whole new climate, a whole new scenery, different people I guess. ... It doesn't matter where you go, you know what I mean?” Maya⁶⁷, at 22, expresses her aspirations as follows: “I just want to move and get out of the city. It's too dangerous for my liking.” When asked where she saw herself a few years from now, Maya replied, “Hopefully in a better situation. Hopefully I have a job. Hopefully I'm more successful. A big house away from this fucking city.”

Emily⁶⁸, age 20, offered a similar account.

I don't see my family living in Baltimore. For the time being, yes, but in the future, in five, ten years, no. I want to go somewhere where it's more peaceful, more quiet, more neighborly. You know. Probably like [a] white people neighborhood, something like that. Because that's the most peacefulness around that and I [don't] want my son growing up to pick up things that I don't want him to pick up or even to be battered with by police in the future. You never know. So I don't want that for my son.

⁶⁴ African American, resident of Madison Park in West Baltimore

⁶⁵ African American, resident of Midtown Edmonson in West Baltimore

⁶⁶ Caucasian, resident of Morrell Park in Southwest Baltimore

⁶⁷ Caucasian, resident of Clifton Park in Northeast Baltimore

⁶⁸ African American, resident of Cold Springs/Central Park Heights in West Baltimore

Tamonica⁶⁹, age 16, longed to experience a broader diversity of people. She hoped to “move into a quiet neighborhood where you can sleep and not hear music and sometimes you think it’s fireworks, or you don’t know if it’s gunshots or fireworks. So, I hope to move somewhere very peaceful and quiet, mixed race... I don’t want to just see all black people every day. I want to see white people, too.

Jay⁷⁰, age 20, explained that the city tourists see isn’t the city these youth must confront every day: “There’s nothing here in Baltimore. I can say that if you’re from here, there’s nothing here. If all you’ve seen out here is violence and nothing but negativity—you follow me—it’s nothing here in Baltimore.” Jay elaborated, “Nobody deserves it. Nobody should have to go through this at all. For people who aren’t from here and are just coming to sightsee and everything, it’s good for them. But they don’t understand the gist of what really goes down here.”

CONCLUSION

In late April 2015, the media and even city and national leaders were quick to paint the youth in Baltimore with one damning brush. Yet in the public narrative about the unrest, the voices of the youth themselves were strikingly absent. Guided by their powerful words, we contrast limited images of the city’s youth with the thoughtful, nuanced perspectives we heard. Rather than celebrate the mayhem that ensued after youth confronted the police at the Mondawmin Mall, they strongly condemn the looting and the resulting damage to their communities.

They looked to the city’s leadership during terrifying days where they sheltered in place at home, but were met with what they felt was a distant, ineffectual response. Despite decades of brutal treatment at the hands of police, few were ready to dismiss law enforcement; in fact, many showed empathy for the police, and believed it was important to distinguish between the “bad apples” and the “rest of the bunch”.

While the public discourse of the events has focused on tensions with the police, these youth offered a far deeper, and more damning, diagnosis. They described a city that fuels failure rather than success and trades hope for disillusionment. They yearned to escape the boundaries of their neighborhoods and city; they wanted mentors who can set an example; they longed for simple things, like jobs, safe public spaces, places that will absorb their energies and stoke their passions, like recreation centers and youth-focused programs. They felt excluded from the benefits of Baltimore’s progress, because in the “real” Baltimore—as opposed to the Baltimore tourists see—there is “nothing.” As Jay said, “Nobody deserves this.”

Though often viewed as source of the city’s problems, these youth are better understood as sentinels. Arguably, they know better than anyone else what is happening with youth in their city, why, and what to do about it. Like many, they see a silver lining in the “moment” for change generated by the unrest. The challenging portrait they offer should be read as a moral imperative—a call to action that we cannot ignore. Readers should be inspired by their strength, their insight, and their stubborn desire for something more. They are hungry for our civic investment, so that they can connect, belong, build and “improve.” Our charge is to transform Baltimore from a “set up city” to the city they deserve, one where, as Rhiannon says, they can “create themselves.”

⁶⁹ African American, resident of Milton Montford in East Baltimore

⁷⁰ African American, resident of Madison Park in West Baltimore