

Rioting in Michigan town exposes social tensions

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Rioting continued for a second night on Tuesday in Benton Harbor, Michigan, as hundreds of area residents protested the death of a motorcyclist who crashed during a police chase early Monday morning. A state of emergency was declared in Benton Harbor and Berrien County following angry protests and clashes with the police that resulted in at least 15 injuries and seven arrests. At least five homes were set ablaze in the course of the social unrest.

Local and state police agencies—with some officers traveling from as far away as the Detroit area—planned a massive presence Wednesday night in anticipation of more confrontations. Local authorities say they will strictly impose a 10:30 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew for minors.

The eruption of the past several days was touched off by the death of 28-year-old Terrance Devon Shurn. But it is the outcome of pent-up rage and desperation among the inhabitants of this impoverished city of 11,000 in southwest Michigan, situated on the shore of Lake Michigan. The predominantly black population has endured years of pervasive unemployment and slum-like social conditions, compounded by daily harassment and mistreatment at the hands of the police.

Shurn died after crashing into an abandoned home in Benton Harbor at about 2 a.m. Monday. The police chase began in nearby Royalton Township, where Berrien County Sheriff's deputies reportedly sighted Shurn and another unidentified motorcyclist traveling at high speeds. The sheriff's deputies eventually gave up the chase, but Benton Township Patrolman Wes Koza spotted the motorcyclists and pursued them into adjoining Benton Harbor.

While Benton Harbor police policy prohibits high-speed chases, Michigan state law allows police to pursue suspects across police jurisdictions, and Benton

Township does not bar the practice of police chasing down suspects at deadly speeds.

Outraged by Shurn's death, an estimated 100 residents showed up at a meeting of the Benton Harbor City Commission Monday evening to protest high-speed police chases. Many blame police chases for three deaths—including Shurn's—over the past two years in the Benton Harbor community.

The crowd spilled out into the hall and repeatedly shouted down Police Chief Samuel Harris and the city commissioners. One man asked, "How can somebody come into our city and chase somebody? What's going to be done?" One woman repeatedly demanded to know, "What was his (Shurn's) crime?"

By 11 p.m. Monday, protesters had gathered at Empire and Broadway Streets, near the crash site. The crowd grew to 300-400 people and some began throwing bricks and bottles at police cars on the scene.

Evette Taylor, expressing the anger of many towards the Benton Township police, told the local *Herald-Palladium*, "They harass us, they pull us over for nothing. We're fed up. When do you say, 'Enough'?"

"We're tired of it. We're tired of it," Antonio Cornelius, 21, told the Associated Press. Cornelius's 11-year-old cousin, Trenton Patterson, was killed in September 2000 when he was run down on a sidewalk by a car being pursued in a high-speed chase by the Benton Township police.

In the course of Monday night's disturbance, a vacant home was reportedly set on fire by the crowd, who impeded firefighters from immediately reaching the blaze. Police donned riot gear but were unable to disperse the crowd until daybreak, threatening them with arrest on felony charges.

On Tuesday a crowd again began to assemble for a second night, growing to an estimated 300 to 500.

Benton Harbor police—bolstered by a SWAT team, a police dog, an armored vehicle, officers from surrounding communities and the Michigan State Police—surrounded a six- to eight-block area.

There were reports of shots being fired from the crowd at passing cars and some motorists being dragged from their cars before their vehicles were set on fire. Of the 15 reported injuries, three were serious.

Police waited until about 2:30 a.m. before moving in with teargas and threats of arrest to disperse the crowd. At least six houses were still burning by morning in the two-block area near where Terrance Shurn died. Police reported making at least seven arrests on unspecified charges.

Lt. Joseph Zangaro, commander of the Bridgman state police post, said there were 118 state troopers on the scene and plans in place to bring in about 150 on Wednesday evening. “We’re planning to saturate the area,” Zangaro said, adding, “I would advise anyone who does not live there to stay away ... anyone who does should stay inside.”

The violent outburst of Benton Harbor residents is an expression of the enormous social tensions in the town, which have been building for years. The area was once relatively prosperous, serving as headquarters to appliance-maker Whirlpool. But while Whirlpool’s headquarters are still located in nearby St. Joseph, the manufacturing facilities have been closed, throwing thousands of workers out of their jobs.

The social crisis has been intensified by the slashing of social benefits carried out by Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

Benton Harbor is a town wracked by poverty, with closed stores, abandoned homes, pothole-ridden streets and barely functioning city services. Only 15 new houses were built between 1999 and March 2000, and 68 percent of the city’s housing was constructed before 1959.

Per capita income in the town is \$8,965. Close to 40 percent of the city’s families live in poverty. The poverty rate for families with children under five is even higher—54.2 percent.

Family median income for the town’s residents is a mere \$19,250, and 32.5 percent of households try to survive on less than \$10,000 a year. More than 30 percent of households are without a vehicle, and close to a fifth have no telephone service.

According to the 2000 US Census, 16.3 percent of the Benton Harbor labor force is unemployed. Workers and their families have endured decades of plant closures and layoffs. Some of the more recent layoffs have come at Whirlpool, Whirlpool plastics supplier Wollin Parts, corrugated package maker Coloma, food service equipment maker Stanley Knight, and the retailer Kmart.

The tension in Benton Harbor resulting from such grinding poverty is exacerbated by a constant reminder of the colossal social inequality that characterizes American society as a whole. Just across the St. Joseph River is the city of St. Joseph, which is 95 percent white and has a per capita income of \$24,949, nearly three times higher than Benton Harbor.

The trendy lakeshore community serves as a summer destination for many affluent Chicagoans, who have set up second homes and dock their pleasure craft in the harbor.

The class and racial divide exemplified by the twin cities of Benton Harbor/St. Joseph was the topic of a 1999 book by Alex Kotlowitz about the murder of a young black man, entitled, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America’s Dilemma*.

Though particularly pronounced in Benton Harbor, conditions of poverty and social inequality are the norm in hundreds of cities and towns across the US. The events of the last few days have revealed the tremendous pressures building up just below the surface of American society, and the ever-widening chasm between millions of working people and a political establishment that functions openly to benefit a wealthy elite.



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