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Sunday, June 22, 2003

Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

Poverty, crime and segregation can combust into the kind of violence that erupted in Benton Harbor last week when residents burned down a house, left, where a motorcyclist was killed after a police chase.

Benton Harbor riots serve as warning to other cities

By Brad Heath / *The Detroit News*

BENTON HARBOR -- In a city where despair combusted into violence, the Rev. Melvin Burton sees a cautionary tale.

"This was coming," said Burton, a pastor of outreach ministry in Benton Harbor, the state's poorest city. "It's coming in other cities, too."

Benton Harbor, scarred by two nights of rioting, is in many ways an icon of all that can go wrong in a city. But in the smoldering combination of poverty, crime and segregation that fueled the violence,

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some see clear warning signs for other cities. Crime and poverty are a volatile mixture. Stir in the resentment and mistrust bred by decades of segregation, and experts say there's an even bigger risk.

"You can't predict where it's going to happen. But we know that these conditions will occasionally result in violence," said John Logan, who studies segregation as head of the Lewis Mumford Center in Albany, N.Y. "Fundamentally, we have to correct the reality that people's chances in black neighborhoods are unequal to what they could aspire to somewhere else."

Detroit is the nation's most segregated metropolis. Flint isn't far behind. Both cities suffer poverty rates more than double the national average and incomes among the state's lowest. Once-attractive neighborhoods are marred by fire and crime. Their schools are failing. And like Benton Harbor, both are ringed by more prosperous -- and mostly white -- neighbors.

Such a cauldron of hopelessness and resentment spilled over in Benton Harbor early Monday after a 28-year-old motorcyclist died during a police chase. For the next two nights, hundreds of rioters in Benton Harbor torched

Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

Benton Harbor is the state's poorest city, while just across the river, sister city St. Joseph, above, is a mostly white, thriving community.

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"Building bridges with art," a project of school children, addresses the racial divide between Benton Harbor and St. Joseph.

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as many as 21 houses in the city's most depressed neighborhood. Some fired shots at outnumbered police officers; others hurled bricks and bottles and attacked bystanders. Hundreds of well-armed police officers largely quelled the violence the following nights. Officials planned to scale back that display of force Saturday night as they grew increasingly confident that police had restored peace in the city, though several hundred officers remained on standby to respond to any new problems.

Jerry Warren took in the riot's aftermath from a metal stool in a friend's yard, a few feet from the blackened foundation of the house where the fatal motorcycle crash of a 28-year-old man fleeing police ignited the trouble.

"What's it like here?" the 54-year-old said as he puffed a cigarette. "Ever been to Beirut? These people are tired and they can't take it."

The roots of that discontentment trace back through decades in which hundreds of businesses boarded up their windows in a city that was once a prime lakeside vacation spot. During that period, most of Benton Harbor's white residents moved across the river to St. Joseph or other more affluent towns. In the end, few jobs or opportunities were left behind.

"They call this the Twin Cities," said Willie Young, gesturing to a street

Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

The building where the motorcycle crashed is plowed over and filled with dirt.

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On watch, Trooper Felix Ambris (left) and Sgt. Steve Barker sit in the rain and keep an eye for trouble in Benton Harbor.

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Zora Tyson, 49, stands next to one of the burned out buildings where the motorcycle crashed during the high-speed police chase.

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corner dominated by a pile of rubble and the empty foundations of two abandoned houses burned during the riots. "If I got a twin that looks like this, I don't want it."

Young, 26, has been out of work for months. And while a nationwide economic slump has made work scarce everywhere, it hasn't escaped his attention that its effects have been particularly sharp in Benton Harbor. "Ain't no jobs for me because I'm from Benton Harbor," he said.

"When God created people, he didn't say he was going to make black people over here and white people over there."

Such tension, often cut along racial lines, resonates in other Michigan cities. It's a reality community leaders in Benton Harbor and elsewhere have begun to address, and it's one state officials say needs to be resolved.

"The situation in Benton Harbor is a symptom of an underlying problem in that community. It's obviously a very racially divided community," Gov. Jennifer Granholm said Thursday.

"I can promise them an ear, I can promise them that I will send in a team, I can promise them we will make Benton Harbor a priority as we are with our cities. Benton Harbor is an example of why we've got to focus on our urban centers."

Racial undercurrents

Ralph Crenshaw has watched his city's long downward arc, a trajectory marked by shuttered factories and neighborhoods that succumbed to poverty and crime.

"There's no question this was inevitable. It was just a question of what would trigger it," said Crenshaw, a city commissioner and uncle of the motorcyclist whose death precipitated the violence. "You can't expect young people to have hopes and dreams when they don't have opportunities."

The problems are easy to spot: soaring poverty rates, faltering schools, rampant crime, mistrust of government and the police

And so is the resentment. The residents of Benton Harbor endure all these things. But across an arching bridge, the residents of mostly white St. Joseph -- like those in most of the surrounding communities -- do not.

The forlorn city of 11,200 has become "a reservation for the poor," Mayor Charles Yarbrough said.

Benton Harbor residents say there were clear racial undercurrents in the violence.

It didn't begin as a racial clash, said JoMae Davis, who fled the riot's epicenter on Empire Avenue as the violence escalated. But as disorder spread, whites who strayed into the area were likely to be targeted, she said.

When the rioting ebbed, community leaders said it was time for reconciliation -- within Benton Harbor and with the communities next door.

"You've got some people in this community who are prosperous and comfortable," said D. Jeffrey Noel, president of the Cornerstone Alliance, a local economic development group. "There's a shared responsibility for fixing this. But those who are comfortable have a greater responsibility to reach out to those who are not."

But some of those across the river say they're reluctant to go back. "I don't feel like it's safe," said Melanie Bush, who is white and lives in nearby Stevensville, where just 15 of the village's 1,200 residents are black.

Powder kegs

Experts see similar tinderboxes of unrest in dozens of cities across the nation, though it's impossible to say which might ever ignite. They see it in cities like Detroit and Highland Park, gripped by many of the problems Benton Harbor faced, or in places like Cincinnati, where racially tinged unhappiness erupted into rioting in 2001.

"The underlying situation is not unlike in many communities," said Dan Krickbaum, executive director of the National Conference for Community Justice, a group working to mend racial tension in Metro Detroit. "Those are the things that when you have something to set them off, you see the kind of civil disturbance you had in Benton Harbor."

Some cities have searched for years for ways to repair those problems; others have barely begun. All must move swiftly to do so, Krickbaum said, even though the tangle of problems has roots so deep they can't be destroyed overnight.

"The potential has been there for a long time, and we shouldn't be surprised by this," said Joe Darden, a professor of urban affairs at Michigan State University. In the 1980s, he was among a contingent of professors dispatched to Benton Harbor in search of solutions for the city's smorgasbord of social ills. The effort failed.

"When you combine segregation with the intense, concentrated poverty, hopelessness and grievances associated with police brutality, you have potential powder kegs on your hands," Darden said.

But should other cities worry?

"I would hesitate to say that I don't," said Flint Mayor James Rutherford. "I'm not concerned that it's likely to happen. But unemployment and despair and lack of hope all contribute to a situation where these types of things can happen."

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