

## Preface | “Baltimore City, You’re Breaking My Heart”

THE EVENTS OF April 2015 catapulted Baltimore onto the national (and international) stage. The story is now well known. On April 12, 2015, Freddie Gray, a young African American, was taken into police custody after making eye contact with officers patrolling near the Gilmor Homes. Gray died a week later from the injuries he sustained during his subsequent ride in a police transport van. In the days that followed, controversy over the cause of Gray’s death reached a boiling point. On the afternoon of April 27, police clashed with black high school students at the Mondawmin Mall, setting off a chain reaction that spilled over into the surrounding neighborhood as some residents began looting, destroying property, and setting fire to cars. The media labeled these events a riot and blamed the youth at the mall for inciting the unrest. Yet the students had been doing what they do every day, trying to catch the bus after school—until they were greeted by a phalanx of police in riot gear and told to disperse. Then they learned that bus service had been suspended, leaving many with no way to get home.

There is no definitive account of how the confrontation at Mondawmin truly went down or who was to blame. What we do know is that the unrest prompted public officials to call in roughly five thousand National Guard troops, plus law enforcement officials from the surrounding area, who would occupy Baltimore for days. Police helicopters swarmed overhead as protesters marched, often ending their rallies at the intersection of Pennsylvania and North avenues (the heart of the unrest), the Western District Police Department, or City Hall. Each night as curfew approached area clergy held hands, creating a human wall between angry protesters and the police. With footage of these events in hand, reporters had no problem following a familiar script, painting Baltimore as burned out and hopeless. A pervasive narrative about Baltimore’s youth was also stoked

as an African American mayor, and even the nation's first black president, castigated at least a segment of them as "thugs."

Some journalists used the occasion to dig deeper into Baltimore's egregious past and explore the roots of the unrest—the city's ugly history of legalized racial segregation, the displacement of African American communities through urban renewal, and more recently, the destabilization of black communities by a wave of foreclosures driven by unscrupulous lending institutions that intentionally targeted African Americans for sub-prime loans.<sup>1</sup> But others invoked individual-level explanations for the deep poverty that held communities like Freddie Gray's Sandtown in a chokehold.<sup>2</sup> Just weeks after the unrest, David Brooks opined in the *New York Times* that "the real barriers to mobility are matters of social psychology,"<sup>3</sup> continuing a line of argument he'd begun a month earlier when he wrote that the suffering of poor communities is primarily due to deficient norms ("Do [people] have the freedom of self-control or are [they] in bondage to [their] desires?" he asked).<sup>4</sup>

News coverage of events following Freddie Gray's death only amplified the view that Baltimore's African American youth should be feared and controlled. One expression of this assessment, penned about a year before the unrest, went viral online. Following the murders of two neighborhood residents, Tracey Halvorsen, a white professional living in the Upper Fell's Point, raged in a blogpost entitled "Baltimore City, You're Breaking My Heart," that she was "tired of being looked at like prey" and "tired of looking at eleven-year-olds as potential thieves, muggers and murderers on my walk home from the office." She said she was "tired of reading about juveniles arrested for violent crimes who are let go because if it's not a 'murder' case, there's no time to worry about it."<sup>5</sup> Halvorsen's recommendation: more police.

The essay set off a citywide debate argued in the *City Paper*, *Baltimore Brew*, and online forums, with many of the critical posts pointing to the city's long-standing racial divide. One particularly pointed response read: "What breaks my heart is when someone says they are tired of looking at black youth in the city as potential predators, as if they are the ones at fault . . . when someone of seeming affluent white privilege seems so far removed from so much of the city and its residents, and can only seem concerned with how these problems are affecting her and those like her."<sup>6</sup>

At the time these events were unfolding, we had spent more than ten years conducting fieldwork with 150 black Baltimore youth who were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s to parents who lived in what had become the city's poorest and most violent environs: Baltimore public housing. Most hailed from high-rise developments, like those featured on David Simon's vivid HBO series *The Wire*. Yet the story that had unfolded

over our decade of research was strikingly different from the “thug” narrative spun by politicians and news anchors alike. Despite childhoods of extreme disadvantage, our study of the unfolding lives of these youth offered a strong corrective to the popular perception of this group as being swept up in crime and delinquency and responsible for turning the city into a “complete shit-hole war zone,” as Halvorsen characterized it.<sup>7</sup>

We followed these youth from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood, talking to their parents, siblings, and teachers along the way. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, getting “caught up” in “the game” was far from the norm—by their own accounts, fewer than one in five had been “in the street” for even a brief time. Instead, the large majority were actively resisting the street, determined to be “about something else,” and hungry for postsecondary education and careers. Most scorned the drug dealers and other hustlers who dominated the public space of their neighborhood and instead strove to model themselves after the nurses, forensic scientists, lawyers, bus drivers, dentists, carpenters, cosmetologists, social workers, chefs, police officers, or small business owners they hoped to become. The large majority finished high school and went on to college or trade school. Few got addicted to alcohol or drugs. Eighty percent found work in the formal sector after high school. And they did so while continuing to struggle against neighborhood risk and the trauma of coming of age in families often plagued by addiction, violence, and financial strife.

Such stories are rendered invisible in the glare of attention on the most sensational aspects of urban America. When covering an isolated incident of looting, it is easy for viewers to believe that the extreme is the norm. This is not to say that the city’s youth do not face challenges. Poor children growing up in Baltimore are less likely to escape poverty than those growing up in any other city in the nation.<sup>8</sup> Paired with the strong mainstream aspirations of the large majority of the youth we studied, however, this finding suggests that the issue for youth in Baltimore is not a matter of “social psychology,” to use David Brooks’s words. Instead, it is further evidence of how much work there is to be done to keep structural barriers from neutralizing the ambitions of those raised in poverty.

Baltimore has changed in ways we never imagined since these young people were born. Baltimore’s high-rise public housing has been torn down, and some of it has been replaced by mixed-income developments in neighborhoods that bring residents of varied incomes into close proximity. In the Inner Harbor, empty lots and rotting warehouses have been replaced by farm-to-table restaurants, coffee shops, galleries, and the like. Industrial areas that had been dormant for decades are now bustling with millennials and empty-nesters residing in new upscale condos and apart-

ments. Baltimore's port, once on the edge of extinction, has seen a surge of containers moving into its channel.<sup>9</sup> Baltimore is not Brooklyn, by any means, but new life is being breathed into some blocks once previously lined with only vacant homes.

The unrest of April 2015 revealed in appalling clarity, however, that the benefits of this painstaking progress have not been equally shared. African American communities in particular have not reaped the dividends of the city's revitalization. Worse, in the wake of the April 2015 unrest, black neighborhoods saw a dramatic spike in homicide and violent crime, exacerbating residents' feelings of fragility and uncertainty about how to move forward and repair the damage and mistrust that had been building for generations.<sup>10</sup>

There is much work to be done in Baltimore, a city whose problems are a microcosm for much of what plagues cities across America. The roots and realities of these problems are invisible to most middle-class and upper-class Americans, who are largely unaware of the grinding routine of survival that more than forty-five million poor people in this country endure every day. This is the America that Michael Harrington powerfully wrote about in his classic book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, over fifty years ago. Harrington brought to life the hidden suffering of the poor, and in doing so, galvanized a generation of policy-makers, social scientists, and activists.<sup>11</sup> Over a half-century later, we are living in times marked by even more economic inequality, and there still exists an "other" America—one where you can play by the rules and still not make it out of poverty. In the pages that follow, we describe what it's like to grow up in the "other" America.