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American uprising: three US cities cracked down on protesters – their histories tell us why

In cities where police gassed protesters, investigation finds history of racial oppression and struggle to implement reforms

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One year ago, in the week after George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police, an uprising ripped across the country at a dizzying pace. As millions flooded the streets police used teargas against demonstrators in more than 100 cities, producing a sense that the nation teetered on the edge of chaos and revolution.

Some of the cities were not large metropolitan areas, but medium-sized towns that exemplified political and social forces that have repressed Black communities for nearly 100 years. The Guardian examined three cities – Asheville, North Carolina; Wichita, Kansas; and Spokane, Washington – and found similar trends were at play.

This uniquely American situation, combined with the economic dislocations of the pandemic, contributed to a powder keg environment. In order to tell this story, the Guardian obtained internal assessments by police after protests in their cities, and spoke to demonstrators in each city. But the story is larger than just one year.

For generations, all three cities divested from Black communities, concentrating them in areas that experience higher levels of crime, police violence and harassment. Police have evaded calls for accountability for decades, residents say, while reforms and oversight have amounted to tinkering at the margins.

When the protests came, their scale in each city was unprecedented, and police were stunned at protesters' nimbleness and willingness for confrontation. They deployed voluminous amounts of chemical munitions and other riot control weapons against protesters, who maintain that police escalated tensions.

The Guardian contacted each police department for comment. Asheville police defended its record by citing its data-driven approach, which stands out among US police. Wichita police emphasized a change in its leadership since 2016, and highlighted a number of community initiatives meant to reduce Black residents' negative contact with the criminal legal system. Spokane police did not respond to inquiries.

A year later, some who advocated for police reform or abolition worry that a familiar pattern of stagnation is repeating. Far from jeopardizing funding, police budgets in these three cities have either increased or not meaningfully changed, and none of the broader issues of equity in Black communities have changed in substantial ways.

Before the protests

When Rob Thomas's car tire went flat about a decade ago he was heartened that an Asheville police officer stopped to help. But then the officer insisted on searching his car, and claimed to find small bits of marijuana. He acted as if he was doing Thomas a favor by letting him go.

"This is just one of the experiences that I personally have faced," Thomas, 34, says. "It's like they can literally bend the law to their will to harass you and do it justifiably."

Thomas now works as a community liaison with the Racial Justice Coalition, a local nonprofit, and understands the systemic impacts of racism on his life. But as an intelligent kid in a "drug-infested environment", he felt alienated and lost, and he went to prison twice before he was 30. Growing up Black in Asheville, a city in mountainous western North Carolina, there were unspoken rules, like never run from a police officer.

"It was well known throughout my community that if you ran from the police, they were going to use force on you whether you gave up or not, for the simple fact that you have already resisted arrest."

If you ran from the police, they were going to use force on you whether you gave up or not

A data portal launched by the city in December shows that Black residents were the targets of a third of all force by Asheville police from last November through March, though they make up about 11% of Asheville's total population. A spokesperson said the department "has invested a considerable amount of education and training to

make sure all of our officers protect the public without any kind of bias toward anyone."

People living in Asheville's public housing developments, home to most of the city's Black residents, report frequent interaction with police, Thomas says. At one development in 2016, an Asheville officer shot and killed 35-year-old Jai (Jerry) Lateef Solveig Williams, leaving his bullet-riddled body in the road for hours as neighbors took pictures.

Asked for comment, Asheville police said Williams was armed.

In response to questions from the Guardian, the Asheville police spokesperson said patrols were not concentrated in public housing developments, citing the department's own small sampling of GPS data. The department has had a unit of officers dedicated to public housing developments since 2012.

In Wichita, Kansas, Black people also experience more negative interactions with police compared with other racial groups. After Black residents living in the city's Central Northeast complained of frequent police vehicle stops for improper turns, a local newspaper in 2006 confirmed that police were targeting the region for pretextual traffic stops. Recent reports indicate a pattern of police more frequently stopping Black residents compared with white is still occurring, though the department disputes racial profiling.

"They were mostly stopping young men, but I was an old Black woman and I got stopped twice," recalls Elaine Guillory, distribution manager at the Community Voice, a local newspaper for Wichita's African-American community. "Both times I got stopped late at night. It was oppressive. It was very oppressive."

In an analysis of public data by the Wichita Eagle from 2018, 43% of lethal force cases dating to 2009 involved Black residents. Although WPD's rate of killings are in the middle of the 100 largest US cities, when police do use excessive force, there is a critical lack of public accountability that follows, according to James Thompson, a civil rights lawyer who reviewed about 25 instances of Wichita police brutality from 2011 to 2015.

"You can't even find out the names of officers that have been involved in a shooting," Thompson said. "I started seeing patterns in the police reports, like they'd say someone made furtive movement towards the waistband ... it's the same language over and over, like they're trained to say these things."

In the last five years, Wichita police, under a new chief, have put together several initiatives for developing community relationships to defuse tensions in response to police violence. A spokesperson for the department also highlighted the department's addition of social workers to its patrols for mental health outreach, housing stabilization and violence interrupters as the rate of killings in the city has increased.

The concentration of homicides in Black neighborhoods, like policing in general, corresponds with racist housing patterns and state-backed displacement of Black people. Wichita's Central Northeast neighborhood tracks with a map of redlining from the 1940s and has remained neglected for decades. Asheville was also redlined, and

later waves of urban renewal broke apart Black communities and cut their population in the city by nearly half from 1950 to 2010.

Though Spokane, a city in Washington near the Idaho border, has a smaller Black population than either Wichita or Asheville, Black people as well as Native Americans are more likely to be suspected of crimes, stopped, arrested, searched and have force used against them.

Spokane police officers' killings of residents ranks as the third highest among the top 100 largest cities in the country, according to Mapping Police Violence. Activist researchers found Black people were killed by police at 3.3 times the rate of white residents.

Like many US cities, Spokane neighborhoods were redlined, and continue to have all-white housing covenants on the books. In 2018, the public was roiled by video of an officer intentionally crushing a Black man's testicles. The officer was fired, but the local district attorney chose not to prosecute him.

"The disparate treatment is especially stark here, where the Black community is 2 to 3% of the population but at least 15 or sometimes 18% of the local jail population," said Kurtis Robinson, the vice-president of Spokane's NAACP chapter.

During the protests

In all three cities the Guardian analyzed, the protests immediately following Floyd's death did not start in neighborhoods with significant Black populations, but instead in cities' downtown regions and other central areas – mirroring a nationwide trend. At some point, people looted stores and defaced property while police made arrests and fired crowd control rounds and teargas.

Spokane police described 31 May as "nine hours of battle" in which there were 300-strong "riots" downtown at one point. People threw rocks and bricks at riot officers, said police, who used pepper spray, teargas and other chemical munitions.

But some who were there disagreed with Spokane police's battlefield description, including Emily Peters, a makeup artist and local activist. Video from the day also shows officers rushing and firing at small groups of protesters.

"In my personal experience and videos I've watched, there's nothing, there's no explanation for their use of teargas and use of force on that day, it just came out of the blue," Peters said.

Police in Spokane, Washington, on 31 May last year.

“They showed up in an escalated position with full armor, snipers on the roof,” added Alexis Gallaway-Tonasket, another local activist present at other demonstrations in Spokane.

More than 2,000 miles away, in Asheville, police reported a shift in the crowd of protesters that night, whose “signs and chants calling for social justice and a stop to police brutality were replaced by vulgarity and direct threats to APD officers”, according to police. About 300 protesters took over highway I-240E and walked against traffic. At least two businesses downtown were defaced, as was a Confederate monument.

With reinforcements from neighboring counties and cities, Asheville police used teargas and pepper balls with irritating chemicals.

“The APD has never encountered a protest where emotions were so high and the anger towards police was so fervent,” Asheville police later said.

Days later, a video clip of Asheville police in riot gear destroying $2,156.88 worth of protesters’ medical supplies and water went viral. The department later said this was a mistake, but assessed its officers’ overall response to protests favorably. It noted the department only received one complaint about an injury caused by police.

But Mary Williams, a nursing school student at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College who attended the protests to provide medical support, said she treated “at least 100 people” for injuries, including teargas irritation, blunt force trauma, and lesions from fired rounds.

Thomas, the Asheville native, said he and two others hosted a meeting with about 80 Black residents to decide whether to join protests. They eventually organized an event

on 6 June, as a strategy for pushing several demands, including a local reparations initiative. By then, according to police, the protests had become less confrontational.

“Some of the original protest participants wanted it to be more anarchist and, you know, and I respect all protesters and every method of protest, but I specifically engaged in peaceful protests that did not result in property damage or physical damage to community members,” Thomas recalled.

The tension in tactics among protesters was also visible in Wichita, which had not seen wide-scale rioting in response to police violence since 1980. In an after action report, police said they had gained intelligence through social media and crowd infiltration, but weren’t trained to handle the unrest and had “equipment issues”.

After several nights of protests where no property damage occurred, one street corner a few miles north of downtown became a gathering spot for youth to protest and create a block party atmosphere. People eventually looted a store and threw things at police, and one person was arrested for gunfire. Wichita police used foam bullets, teargas, bean bags and other rounds.

It was a change for the department, which once received praise from President Obama after arranging a cookout with the city’s Black Lives Matter chapter in 2016.

After the protests

As time passed, the intense calls for change that rang out in the streets clashed against various realities in the three cities.

In the background, former President Trump’s campaign leveraged hyped-up political attacks by “antifa” through targeted political ads. Threats and violence from militia groups and white supremacists also ticked upwards across the country.

By August, Wichita’s police chief, Gordon Ramsay, was using the city’s brief spell of protests to argue that his agency needed more money, so that officers could receive more training for mental healthcare and engage in “community policing” – a form of patrol in which officers develop goodwill to build intelligence relationships with residents.

The proposal was for $7.3m in new funds. Many at a city council meeting on 11 August argued fiercely against it.

The increase would be “a slap in the face of democracy”, said Lawanda Deshazer, a vice-president of the local NAACP. Deshazer suggested instead that Wichita cut the cost of school resource officers in half and put the money toward anti-poverty measures such as mental health services and homeless relief.

Wichita city council voted 7-0 to increase the police budget, including for hiring more officers. Recently, two protest leaders from last summer who were vocal about defunding Wichita police were convicted of protest-related crimes – spurring allegations of political targeting.

Broader reforms remain elusive, though some changes were made after the uprising, according to Sheila Officer, president of Wichita's Racial Profiling Citizens Advisory Board. Wichita police started issuing vouchers to some drivers for minor auto repairs instead of writing traffic tickets. A policy mandating officers intervene when a colleague misbehaves was also added, and Officer says she is now advocating to alter the local police union contract.

Among other issues with the contract, Officer said, is that it gives police the upper hand in the investigative process after they kill someone.

"The public and the community that they serve need to have input on what and when the contract will be up for renewal," Officer said.

In Spokane, the city recently approved its contract with the local police union, which had sought to weaken the authority of the city's police watchdog office. That proposal failed, but the union was able to boost salaries for officers.

Sixty-one per cent of Spokane's general fund in its 2021 budget is marked for "public safety and judicial services", including police. With a relative high rate of homelessness, mental health workers from a non-profit health organization are often deployed to service calls alongside police. Some think this should change.

"We are working on finding ways to transition to a society in which our first responders are appropriately trained for what they're doing," said Gallaway-Tonasket, a member of the group Human Rights Activist Coterie of Spokane.

The culture of Spokane police is also a concern. Last October, officers were planning to attend a presentation by David Grossman, the "killologist" military veteran who trains officers how to attack and kill without hesitation. Though Grossman cancelled his appearance, another trainer filled in for him, leading to protests.

Kurtis Robinson, the local NAACP vice-president, is seeking a cultural change within Spokane police, and was recently appointed by Washington's governor to a state law enforcement training commission. He says some protesters have criticized his willingness to engage in dialogue with police, but believes it's the right path.

"Hopefully, we see a reduction and diminishing of the fragile pushback [from police] that we sometimes get far too often over here, that blue fragility," Robinson said.

By outward appearances, Asheville seems like the most responsive to the demands of protesters. The city passed a resolution to study a local reparations program for Black residents, and the city council slightly reduced the police budget by reshuffling positions. This past March, the city voted to remove a large downtown Confederate monument.

Yet nearly a year after the reparations resolution was passed, Asheville has made little movement. Other gains have been small and primarily symbolic. Further delay of the reparations initiative could "widen divides in the community and reinforce the existing distrust that the local black community has in the government", according to a group of Harvard graduate students studying progress in Asheville.

The city didn't respond to the Guardian's questions about these characterizations. In May, the city announced a Truth Telling Speaker Series, "the first phase of the city of Asheville's process to deliver community reparations for Black Asheville".

For Rob Thomas, who considers himself a "long-term abolitionist", nothing proposed by the city matches the scale of change he says must happen for Black people to come up from under the weight of state repression.

He pointed to a small investment the city made to provide free wifi access for people living in the city's public housing developments. Though touted as a win for bridging the digital divide, the city is giving less money than the county or the service provider.

For him, the solutions to violent policing are linked to improving life for Black people. Investments in communities must be paired with a reimagined conception of "public safety" that doesn't criminalize based on race or poverty.

"They need to give community control over the reparations commission, and they need to give land and money to the Black community to address the disparities, because there is no other solution out of any of this."