

Commentary, Police and Prosecutors

Black Chicago has been looted for decades

By **Carlos Ballesteros** | 20 hours ago



AP Photo/Teresa Crawford

Workers begin to board up a display window at the Louis Vuitton store Monday, Aug. 10, 2020, after overnight vandals hit many high-end stores in Chicago. Chicago's police commissioner said more than 100 people were arrested following a night of looting and unrest that left several officers injured and caused damage in the city's upscale Magnificent Mile shopping district and other parts of the city.

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The summer of 2020 has been a summer defined by agitation. What started in Minnesota following the [police killing of George Floyd](https://www.nbcnews.com/george-floyd-death) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/george-floyd-death>) spread quickly across the nation. This past week, Kenosha, Wisconsin, became the latest flashpoint, as [protesters clashed with police](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/protesters-return-streets-kenosha-wisconsin-where-black-man-was-shot-n1237925) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/protesters-return-streets-kenosha-wisconsin-where-black-man-was-shot-n1237925>) and armed vigilantes over the police shooting of 29-year-old Jacob Blake. One of those vigilantes has been [charged with killing two protesters](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/suspect-jacob-blake-protest-shooting-appear-court-extradition-hearing-n1238502) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/suspect-jacob-blake-protest-shooting-appear-court-extradition-hearing-n1238502>) and injuring another.

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(<https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/kenosha-police-funding-racism-jacob-blake/>).

[Kenosha police shooting of Jacob Blake spotlights systemic racism, police spending in Wisconsin](https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/kenosha-police-funding-racism-jacob-blake/) (<https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/kenosha-police-funding-racism-jacob-blake/>)

But another Midwestern city — my city — was the center of attention three weeks ago.

In the early hours of Aug. 10, caravans from across the city ransacked high-end stores in and around downtown after rumors circulated on social media that Chicago police had shot and killed a 15-year-old Black boy on the South Side. Police did shoot 20-year-old Latrell Allen, who is Black, the day before. Police allege Allen fired gunshots at them, but officers [were not equipped with body-worn cameras](https://www.chicagoreporter.com/latrell-allen-police-shooting-exposes-gaps-in-body-camera-and-foot-pursuit-policies/) (<https://www.chicagoreporter.com/latrell-allen-police-shooting-exposes-gaps-in-body-camera-and-foot-pursuit-policies/>), and no other footage of the incident has been made available. Allen is expected to recover.

Images of people walking in and out of department stores with their hands full of products transfixed a confused nation. [Mayor Lori Lightfoot called](#) (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/08/10/widespread-looting-triggered-police-shooting-englewood-lightfoot/>) the looting “an assault” on Chicago, while [the Rev. Jesse Jackson said](#) (<https://twitter.com/RevJJackson/status/1292826658379096066>) it was “humiliating” and “morally wrong.”

But young Black activists pushed back. “When protesters attack high-end retail stores that are owned by the wealthy and service the wealthy, that is not ‘our’ city and has never been meant for us,” [Black Lives Matter Chicago said in a statement](#) (<https://www.blacklivesmatterchicago.com/press-release-on-the-englewood-police-shooting/>) after the looting. “These protests can only end when the safety and wellbeing of our communities is finally prioritized.”

So which is it? Once the looting stopped, the nation’s attention quickly moved on. But the problems endemic to Chicago, the problems that provided the tinder for this particular blaze, remain. And they deserve to be addressed.

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(<https://www.injusticewatch.org/data/2020/chicago-has-nearly-tripled-per-capita-police-spending-since-1964-data-show/>)

[Chicago has nearly tripled per capita police spending since 1964, data show](https://www.injusticewatch.org/data/2020/chicago-has-nearly-tripled-per-capita-police-spending-since-1964-data-show/)

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Prioritizing Black communities has always been a problem for Chicago. Since arriving en masse during the Great Migration more than a century ago, Black Chicagoans have been violently relegated to the margins, exploited at every turn and expected to do more with less. Racism in Chicago even shocked [Martin Luther King Jr., who said](#) (<https://interactive.wttw.com/playlist/2018/04/11/martin-luther-king-and-fair-housing-chicago>) he had “never seen — even in Mississippi and Alabama — mobs as hostile and as hate-filled” as the ones he saw here.

The Chicago Police Department has often served as the tip of this racist spear, most egregiously showcased in the killing of Black Panther Fred Hampton and the reports of decades of [torture of Black residents](#) (<https://www.chicagoreporter.com/human-rights-practices-inform-chicago-ordinance-in-police-torture-case/>) under former police commander Jon Burge and his “midnight crew.”

That legacy of systemic racism is at the root of the deep poverty gripping Chicago’s Black neighborhoods today. While there is a good chance this month’s episode of looting was [fueled by fake rumors online](#) (<https://blockclubchicago.org/2020/08/11/police-shot-a-black-man-in-englewood-then-misinformation-spread-like-wildfire/>), it showcases the inequities that belie Chicago’s standing as one of America’s liberal bastions.

Like any other segregated city in America, everything in Chicago has to do with geography. The latest bout of looting is no different. In Streeterville, a mostly white and rich neighborhood north of downtown that saw [many shops torn up](#) (<https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/08/10/looters-ransack-streeterville-florist-shop-that-opened-just-a-few-months-ago/>), the average life expectancy is 90, compared to 60 in Englewood, a predominantly Black and working-class neighborhood where police shot Allen.

That life expectancy gap is the largest between neighborhoods in the same city nationwide, according to a [study by New York University School of Medicine](#) (<https://nyulangone.org/news/large-life-expectancy-gaps-us-cities-linked-racial-ethnic-segregation-neighborhood>) released last year.

Disparities like those reflect decades of disinvestment and disregard for Black people’s health and well-being, most recently highlighted by the [announced closure of Mercy Hospital](#) (<https://news.wttw.com/2020/08/04/mercy-hospital-plans-close-resurface-concerns-south-side>) on the South Side. When that hospital shuts its doors next year, it will be the third to close since 2018 that serves mostly Black, low-income patients in the Chicago area, creating what community activists are calling a “[health care desert](#) (<https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2020/07/29/activists-mercy-hospital-closing-will-create-health-care-desert-for-bronzeville/>)” following a devastating pandemic that has killed and sickened Black Chicagoans at a disproportionate rate.

Chicago’s Black neighborhoods have also been plundered for decades. An [analysis of home loans](#) (<https://interactive.wbez.org/2020/banking/disparity/>) from 2012 through 2018 by NPR affiliate WBEZ and City Bureau, a local journalism nonprofit, found that for every \$1 banks loaned in Chicago’s white neighborhoods, they invested 12 cents in the city’s Black neighborhoods. [The Chicago Reporter found](#) (<https://www.chicagoreporter.com/high-price-home-ownership/>) that in 2005, Black homeowners earning \$100,000 or more a year were more likely to get saddled with expensive mortgages than white homeowners earning less than \$35,000.

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(https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/chicago-police-staffing/)

That trend is an extension of racist real estate practices that robbed Black homebuyers in Chicago of an estimated \$3.2 to \$4 billion in wealth between 1950 and 1970, according to a [report by Duke University's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity](https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/5/30/18644165/chicago-redlining-racism-real-estate-contract-rent-mortgages-black-homeownership-racial-wealth-gap) (<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/5/30/18644165/chicago-redlining-racism-real-estate-contract-rent-mortgages-black-homeownership-racial-wealth-gap>) published last year.

These discriminate practices propelled the racial income and wealth inequalities we see today.

According to a [2017 report by nonprofit Prosperity Now](https://prosperitynow.org/files/PDFs/profiles/Racial_Wealth_Divide_in_Chicago_RWDI.pdf) (https://prosperitynow.org/files/PDFs/profiles/Racial_Wealth_Divide_in_Chicago_RWDI.pdf), the average white-owned business in Chicago is worth 12 times more than the average Black-owned business; the median yearly income for a Black household in Chicago is less than half that of the median white household; and a third of Black households have a net worth of \$0, compared to 15 percent of white households.

All of this amounts to a historic pattern of perpetual, systematic looting of Chicago's Black community. As of Aug. 13, at least [42 people had been charged with felonies](https://twitter.com/SAKimFoxy/status/1294032983192743937?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet) (https://twitter.com/SAKimFoxy/status/1294032983192743937?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet) in the alleged looting three weeks ago. How many bankers have been charged for stealing from Black families?

Righting these historic wrongs will take what one South Side [community organizer calls](https://inthesetimes.com/article/chicago-police-lightfoot-homicides-safety-reform) (<https://inthesetimes.com/article/chicago-police-lightfoot-homicides-safety-reform>) "deep interventions:" Long-term commitments to struggling neighborhoods beyond cops and jails that include funding for affordable housing, mental health services and jobs training.

Activists say money for those initiatives should come from police coffers. In 2020, the operating budget for the [Chicago Police Department hit \\$1.65 billion](https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/chicago-police-staffing/) (<https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/2020/chicago-police-staffing/>), the largest police budget in the city's history. Most of that money is earmarked for salaries and overtime pay for the 13,000 or so sworn Chicago police officers, giving the city more cops per capita than New York or L.A.

Yet despite those record numbers, murder rate spiked again this year to levels unseen since the 1990s. Community organizers say those numbers are proof that it's time to defund the police department to free up funds for community initiatives that can better prevent violence. Lightfoot has so far refused to entertain those calls, [deriding the movement](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/24/chicago-lightfoot-police-defund-336414) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/24/chicago-lightfoot-police-defund-336414>) as "a nice hashtag."

But the looting shows Chicago's legacy of plundering Black wealth will not fade away on its own. Reparations of all kinds must be made to Black Chicago.

[Martin Luther King Jr. said](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/chapter-28-chicago-campaign) (<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/chapter-28-chicago-campaign>) he came to the Windy City more than 50 years ago because he believed that "if the problems of Chicago ... can be solved, they can be solved everywhere."

It's incumbent on us to still believe that's true.