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4 decades later, poverty persists

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Where riots raged, signs of progress, decay

Last of Three Parts

Forty years ago, at 134 W. Center St., a police officer and an elderly woman were found shot dead in a burned-out home. Then-Mayor Henry W. Maier called the National Guard to quell a civil disturbance in the city.

Now, four decades after riots fueled in part by housing discrimination, the neighborhood surrounding that address presents a contrast - what Milwaukee Urban League President Ralph Hollmon calls a tale of two cities. Though many African-Americans in Milwaukee benefited from the civil rights struggles that sparked the riots, many others are struggling economically and socially.

The Journal Sentinel looked at the neighborhood near the epicenter of the 1967 riots - a 12-block swath that runs east of N. King Drive between Wright and Locust streets.

Data from the U.S. Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics and city crime records show residents are much worse off on many measures than they were in the years leading up to and right after the riots.

- Residents of the 12-block neighborhood on average make less than half the money they did back then, even after adjusting for inflation.
- Male residents are twice as likely to be jobless. The neighborhood has seen a nearly 15 percentage-point drop in the proportion of residents working in manufacturing.
- Residents are more likely to have finished high school or college than they were decades ago. Still, the figures aren't the kind educators would likely celebrate. Nearly half of residents over 25 years old lack a high school diploma.
- Many of the jobless have barriers that make them tough sells for employers while also making them feel increasingly hopeless. Many have criminal records, have no driver's license or can't pass a drug test.

It's not Milwaukee's poorest or most crime-ridden neighborhood. It was then and is now predominantly African-American and more economically depressed than the city as a whole.

Today, a drive through this neighborhood reveals bright spots. The King Drive Commons building offers new, sleek apartments that have balconies out back.

A few blocks south, the new Finesse Jazz and Supper Club serves up cool, \$5 martinis on Sunday nights.

But a couple blocks east, many homes are in decay. Men and women in their 20s and 30s stand on porches in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. Empty lots dot residential streets like pockmarks, littered with trash and abandoned toys.

Turn to the intersection of W. Center St. and N. King Drive and check cashing shops sit on three of the four corners.

Go down N. 1st. St. and find 56-year old Lonnie Smith standing on the porch, on a street where drug deals go down in broad daylight, getting ready to look for job openings after two years of unemployment.

"Clearly there are important, positive things going on in the neighborhood, and there are possibilities for revitalization," said Marc Levine, director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who studied the surrounding neighborhood as part of a 2002 report on the central city.

"But at this point, by any reasonable measure, this is a neighborhood in economic crisis for which the strategies that have been adopted over the last decade have certainly not borne any major fruit."

1968 survey

Even one year after the riots, people disagreed on why people hit the streets that summer. A survey completed in 1968 gives some insight.

The survey's author, Jonathan A. Slesinger, an associate professor at UWM, interviewed 387 white and African-American Milwaukee residents.

The results suggested the riots had a lot to do with poverty, bad housing, lack of opportunity and a boatload of broken promises.

A look at the neighborhood where Lonnie Smith lives today shows that things don't appear much better.

Many more residents of this neighborhood are likely to hold high school diplomas than they were in the '60s and '70s, but far fewer are employed.

Even though rents in the neighborhood have gone up with inflation, salaries have not kept pace.

Levine said the increase in poverty and joblessness despite the increase in education reveals that training and education alone won't solve joblessness in the central city.

"For any one individual, improving your education will improve your employment prospects," he said. "As a communitywide strategy, (education) is simply not sufficient to create the number of jobs that are necessary."

Incomes in this neighborhood have long lagged behind incomes in the city as a whole. In 1959, the median family income in this area was the equivalent of \$39,539 in today's dollars. City residents earned about 18% more, with a median income of \$46,817, according to the 1960 Census of Population and Housing.

But by 2000, the gap had widened. The median family income in the neighborhood was \$20,732 in 2007 dollars. In the city as a whole, it was more than double that, at \$46,992, according to the 2000 Census.

"It's a change in the overall city economy and the erosion of the city's overall job base, and in this neighborhood it's slightly worse," Levine said. "In particular (it shows) the decline in the number of jobs that are available to low- to moderate-skilled workers who are by and large the workers likely to be living in this neighborhood."

A 2002 report by Levine showed that the city's overall black male employment rate plummeted by 21 percentage points from 1970 to 2000, according to Census data. That's nearly double the 13 percentage-point decline in the national employment rate during the Great Depression, from 1929 to 1933.

The Urban League's Hollmon said that since the civil rights era, African-Americans have had more opportunity to rise into the middle class and thrive. But the census figures also show another population in despair.

"I like to characterize our community as a tale of two cities," Hollmon said of black Milwaukee. "On the one hand, you have some African-Americans who are doing well if not very well, but then on the other hand you have some African-Americans that are not doing well. They're still mired in poverty and hopelessness."

This 12-block neighborhood straddles black Milwaukee's two cities.

Craig Wroten, community organizer with the Harambee Ombudsman Project Inc., helps run a neighborhood watch program here.

"The residents in these areas, a lot of them are stakeholders, a lot of them have been there for quite a long time, they're living in their parents' houses. That's the good stuff," Wroten said.

The neighborhood's eastern corridor borders the up-and-coming Riverwest area.

On Palmer St., Fond du Lac native Matthew Kolell, 34, has lived for three years with his wife and four children, in a new house built by the nearby Harambee Ombudsman Project.

"Most of our neighbors have been very good," Kolell said. "It's nice because there's a mixture of races - Hispanic, white and African-American, all living on the same street."

A lawyer who runs a practice downtown and goes to church down the street, Kolell admits he and his wife considered moving last fall when a stray bullet flew through their front door.

"It's still unnerving that it happened," Kolell said.

At N. 2nd and W. Wright streets, Ken Johnson and Florine Robinson, a retired couple in their late 60s, sit on their porch and wave to the many passersby they recognize - young adults visiting their parents, two men in a van offering deals on fresh steaks.

Robinson bought the house for \$2,000 in the late 1970s, and Johnson retired from Wisconsin Bell more than a decade ago, after 31 years.

He was one of the first black men hired as a central office technician for the phone company. Since retiring, he's worked at a nearby dollar store and the Hyatt Regency Milwaukee, just to keep busy. He thinks the younger generation lacks his strong work ethic.

"There's jobs, but a lot of people don't want work," Johnson said. "I hear them sit and talk. They'd rather sell dope."

For Lonnie Smith, it's not hard to believe the dilapidated duplex where he lives is just around the corner from the place that saw the most violent episode of Milwaukee's riots 40 years ago.

His story is not necessarily typical of this neighborhood's residents, but it does reflect some of the complicated stories behind their poverty and barriers to better lives.

Smith lives in a duplex where there are four adults, five children and zero jobs. He owes more than \$20,000 in back child support, \$5,000 on his electric bill, and \$2,500 in back rent for the duplex. His landlord has been cited by the city for 37 unabated code violations.

In a manila folder, Smith keeps the evidence of his working life: an expired license from the Wisconsin Department of Regulation and Licensing as a private security person and a tractor-trailer training certificate from a company in Chicago.

He worked as a driver for a now-defunct transportation company for nine years and has held several private security jobs for a year or two at a time. But he's been unemployed for what he describes as his longest stretch - two years without a job.

While there are openings for truck drivers locally, it's tough to get those jobs because of qualification requirements. Kreilkamp Trucking, Inc. a 650-employee, family-owned trucking business in Allenton, Wis., gets between 800 and 1,000 applications a month for driver positions. But only about 5% meet the company's and the Department of Transportation's qualifications, said Amanda Kreilkamp, the company's recruiting director.

Smith's life and his family's lives are also riddled with problems.

The mother of his two children, Shakitha Phillips, 28, who also lives in the duplex with her brother, is a former drug addict with mental health issues.

Crack cocaine hit Milwaukee in the late 1980s, said Ned Rubin, an addiction expert and drug treatment provider at Aurora Sinai Medical Center. Its availability and relative affordability are what's made it most devastating, especially to low-income, central-city residents, Rubin said.

Because cocaine, alcohol and marijuana remain the drugs of choice in neighborhoods like Smith's, recovering addicts face constant temptations.

There are no available statistics on drug arrests in the 12-block neighborhood, but drugs have taken a tremendous toll on the city over the past 40 years.

In 2005, drug arrests citywide were 13 times the number of arrests for drug violations in 1967, according to Milwaukee Police Department records.

In the late 1970s, about a third of those arrested for drug violations were under the age of 18, up from 5% a decade earlier. When crack cocaine arrived in the late '80s, it dramatically changed a drug trade that had been dominated by heroin and powder cocaine. Drug-related incarceration became more common, especially among black residents.

As of mid-July, 746 offenders were serving time in the state's adult prisons for Milwaukee County drug convictions, according to Department of Corrections spokesman Alec Loftus. Of that number, 531 inmates, or 71%, were black. According to 2005 Census data, 26% of Milwaukee County's population was black.

Smith's ex-girlfriend Phillips recently got a three-week job with the State Fair, picking up trash. She is otherwise unemployed.

Phillips' brother James Dooley, 21, lives with her on N. 1st St. He has faced trouble getting a job because of his criminal record. He's been to prison twice, once for possession of cocaine and once for the manufacture and delivery of marijuana, according to state records.

A long climb

Former felons face an uphill battle on the job market. As part of their sentence, they may have their driver's licenses suspended and be subject to fines.

"We don't have foundries, we don't have tanneries, we don't have breweries, and that's typically where guys would go who had problems with the law," said John Pawasarat, senior research scientist and director at the UWM's Employment & Training Institute.

"Now I have no idea where these guys are getting employment," he said. "I would venture to say the prospects are dismal."

Pawasarat's recent study shows some 40% of African-American males aged 25 to 29 years old in Milwaukee County have been incarcerated at one time or another.

Hollmon said he often sees people come to the Urban League with criminal records and a number of other barriers that make them unemployable unless they get help.

"A large number of people coming to the Urban League are desperate," he said. "They've got no diploma, no driver's license, a criminal record, limited work experience and . . . drug and alcohol problems."

"When they come in desperate for a job, we know they're not work-ready. You can't send them out to an employer in that condition. When you say here's what you have to do . . . people leave, and we don't see them again."

Of the roughly 1,200 people who come through the Urban League's doors, Hollmon estimates up to a quarter don't come back.

"I don't want to debate whether this population should have made better life choices. Yes, they should have," he said. "The reality is, they didn't. We have to deal with the situation that exists."

Looking for work

Lonnie Smith steps onto his porch wearing a silky green dress shirt, black pants with a torn belt loop - an outfit he described as decades-old - and a pair of shiny black shoes. He's ready to look for a job.

From inside, Lonnie Jr., 4, presses against the glass. "Be good," Smith tells him.

Smith closes the door to his place, revealing a message scrawled on paper: "If you knock on my door after 11 p.m. I'm calling the police. Respect my kids respect my house and rules. Respect me."

At the YWCA, Smith meets with a W-2 case manager.

Smith has two children with Phillips, and Phillips has three other children. They had been living separately, each receiving \$673 per month in W-2 assistance.

When a case manager discovered Smith and Phillips were living together, W-2 officials combined their cases.

So, the first thing Smith has to do is sign a statement that he and Phillips aren't living together anymore.

Next, Smith meets with employment placement specialist Antonio Serrano to look at job leads.

"There's a security job at 85th and Capitol," Serrano says.

"Is that SPI (Security Personnel Inc.)?" Smith says. "I done applied there so many times."

"My suggestion is," Serrano says, "You ask for the hiring manager. You just go ask to speak to the manager, or get a card so you could call the next day."

Smith nods. He doesn't have a phone.

Serrano points out another job. "Oh, you need a driver's license. Never mind."

Smith got caught driving with a revoked license, so he owes money to reinstate it.

Serrano prints job listings for Smith and reminds him: Find out what you owe for the driver's license. Get to the Courthouse to show you have custody of the kids so you can stop owing child support. Find an apartment with heat.

Smith's duplex has no windows in the second floor. During the winter, he covered the empty spaces with plastic.

Down the street from Smith's duplex lives 68-year-old Isaac Jackson, a retiree who has not always lived in this neighborhood but has seen the difficulties people have getting jobs.

Unlike Smith, Jackson never graduated from high school, but he worked for 23 years as a welder, machine operator and forklift driver for Bucyrus Erie Co.

He knows most of the young people he sees in the neighborhood could never have such a career now.

"A lot of them don't have the skills," Jackson said. "You've got to have a high school diploma to get a job. Or the jobs are out in New Berlin, and you got no way to get there."

It's well known that the loss of manufacturing jobs throughout the region has contributed to unemployment and hit the African-American population hard.

From 1963 to 2002, manufacturing jobs in the city decreased by 70%, according to a report by UWM economist Levine.

Less explored: the growth of manufacturing jobs in Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee counties.

Manufacturing jobs in these outlying counties increased 187% in the same period, Levine's report showed. But most of those employees are white.

Lonnie Smith worked in Oconomowoc years ago, through a temp agency. He had a car at that time. Now, he says, he would apply for a job in Oconomowoc, but he said it would be difficult to hold down such a job without a car.

"Sometimes you might have to wait 45 minutes for a bus. But if it's cold as hell, or hot like it was the other day, you might not make it waiting that long," Smith said.

Smith's driver's license problem is one of the most pervasive.

Another study by UWM's Pawasarat found Milwaukee's municipal courts have suspended or revoked driver's licenses for mostly African-Americans for non-driving related offenses. In 2003, the court suspended some 68,191 licenses for not paying civil forfeitures, and 81% of these suspensions were to African-Americans.

Several of Smith's neighbors have the same problem.

Artrell "Trell" Smith, 22, doesn't have a license. Neither does Dooley, Phillips' brother.

Trell Smith, who lives a couple doors down on N. 1st St., makes ends meet by giving \$5 haircuts to neighborhood kids. He dreams of owning his own barbershop and investing in real estate, but he can't afford to pay for the classes to work toward his barber's license.

"If I don't cut hair, I don't eat," he said. "That's why I say it's hard, real hard."



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