# A decade on: Baltimore reflects on the legacy of Freddie Gray and ongoing quest for justice



A decade after the death of Freddie Gray, Baltimore continues to grapple with the aftermath of the unrest sparked by the young Black man's fatal injuries sustained during police transport in 2015. Ray Kelly, a community activist from Gray’s west Baltimore neighbourhood, reflected on the turbulent period that saw protests and riots fuelled by longstanding systemic inequalities faced by Black residents.

Gray’s death on 27 April 2015, following his arrest and transport in a police van where he was left unrestrained and denied medical attention, ignited demonstrations that included setting police cars on fire and widespread looting across predominantly Black west Baltimore. Protesters voiced opposition to entrenched oppression manifesting in racist housing policies, underfunded education, limited employment opportunities, high gun violence rates, and deteriorating living conditions.

Kelly, who had personally endured the challenges of growing up amid the crack cocaine epidemic and aggressive policing strategies during the 1980s and 1990s, became actively involved in the call for police accountability. Having experienced addiction and incarceration himself, Kelly took on a role helping residents engage with the U.S. Department of Justice’s investigation into the Baltimore Police Department’s (BPD) practices. As he said, “It was a gamble… It wasn’t really what this community does,” but the investigation revealed patterns of excessive force, discriminatory policing, and unlawful arrests, particularly targeting Black people. This led to a 2017 consent decree mandating reforms within the police department.

Though progress has been slow, there have been steps forward. Recently, a federal judge terminated compliance requirements in two key areas of the consent decree, signalling improvements, including how suspects are transported in police vans. Police Commissioner Richard Worley described a cultural shift within the force, moving “from warriors to guardians,” highlighting enhanced foot patrols, decreased low-level arrests, and training focusing on emotional regulation. These measures, alongside partnerships addressing gun violence’s root causes, have contributed to historic decreases in homicides and shootings.

Nevertheless, mistrust between the community and police persists. U.S. District Judge James Bredar acknowledged during a consent decree hearing that fundamentally redefining the police department’s image in the eyes of Baltimore residents “is going to take years and years.”

Much of the ongoing struggle resonates in the Sandtown-Winchester neighbourhood where Gray was arrested. Once a vibrant Black cultural and economic hub centred around Pennsylvania Avenue, decades of disinvestment, economic decline, and societal neglect transformed it into an area marked by poverty, drug markets, and over-policing. Despite political promises to invest in housing and youth programmes, activists like Kelly remain frustrated. “It’s still the same damn place with the same damn issues,” he stated, pointing to the recent closure of the local recreation centre in 2021 which left young people with few positive outlets.

Young resident Ryeheen Watson echoed this sentiment, sharing how growing up after Gray’s death felt like “nothing good comes for our community,” yet expressed hope amid adversity: “When you’re starting as an underdog, there’s nowhere to go but up.”

The political context adds another layer of complexity. Billy Murphy, the Baltimore attorney who represented Gray’s family, warned of retrenchment in civil rights and racial equity initiatives under federal administrations unsupportive of such measures. “Where are we today? That’s where we are… We are heading backwards,” Murphy remarked at a recent commemorative event. Conversely, Dayvon Love, director of public policy at the grassroots think tank Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, noted a positive shift locally, with historically marginalised Black voices increasingly included in political dialogue. Love credited Gray’s death as a pivotal moment enabling greater advocacy: “That has advanced our ability to advocate unapologetically for Black people in ways that before the uprising were shut out.”

Baltimore’s current mayor, Brandon Scott, has emphasised his administration’s commitment to improving neglected neighbourhoods through substantial investments, including a $15 million plan to renovate the Sandtown recreation centre and upgrades to Gilmor Homes, the public housing complex linked to Gray’s arrest. However, Scott asserted, “We’re not celebrating here, because the work is not complete.”

As the city marks ten years since Freddie Gray’s death, his twin sister Fredricka honoured his memory alongside city officials by laying a wreath near the site of his arrest. Reflecting the enduring call for justice, she said, “It’s still justice for Freddie Gray… Ten years now.” Ray Kelly suggested that rather than focusing solely on the anniversary of Gray’s death, perhaps it is his birthday, 16 August 1989, that merits celebration—a reminder of the life lived amid a community’s enduring quest for change.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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