

'There's a sense that things are falling apart.' What's so different about today's protests?

By [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 9, 2020, 12:09 p.m.



Protestors demonstrated in Jamaica Plain. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The Rev. Miniard Culpepper, senior pastor of Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church, was a teenager when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in the spring of 1968 and riots embroiled American cities, including his Roxbury neighborhood, Grove Hall.

Five decades later, Culpepper, a lifelong civil rights activist, is still fighting for the same ideals King stood for — freedom, justice, and equality for Black Americans.

“We grew up thinking the progress that was being made would finally create an equal society only to be proven wrong,” said Culpepper, who led a prayer march for racial justice with other clergy from Roxbury’s Nubian Square to Boston police headquarters on May 31. “We never thought we would find ourselves in the same situation that we fought so desperately to get out of in the ’60s.”



The Rev. Miniard Culpepper speaks at a June 8 memorial service for African-Americans George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others killed by police and civilians. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Cities and towns in all 50 states — plus several countries around the world — are convulsing with grief and rage over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black Americans, with thousands marching in protest of systemic racism and police brutality. The protests, which have continued for days in Boston and its suburbs, initially drew comparisons to the uprisings that roiled the nation during the civil

rights movement or [in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014](#), as police officers violently clashed with demonstrators, and governors in several states deployed the National Guard.

But against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, scholars say this moment in American history is distinct. Today's uprisings have inspired previously unseen levels of participation. The protesters, they point out, are multigenerational and multiracial. The urgency and indignation on the streets is palpable.

"It feels like a much more diverse and larger coalition of people who feel implicated in the problem of police violence and racial domination and who want to be, who at least can imagine themselves, as being a part of the solution," said Brandon Terry, an assistant professor of African and African American Studies and Social Studies at Harvard University.

New polling shows attitudes about racism and police brutality have shifted dramatically. According to a [June 2 Monmouth University poll](#), 57 percent of Americans believe police are more likely to use excessive force against Black people. That's up from 33 percent in 2014, [following the grand jury decision](#) not to indict a New York City police officer in the death of Eric Garner, a Black man whose dying words, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry. Seventy-six percent of Americans also believe racial and ethnic discrimination is a "big problem" in the country, up from just over half of all respondents in January 2015.

"This is much different than something like Ferguson," Terry added, in reference to the volatile protests that erupted in the St. Louis suburb in 2014 after a Black teenager, Michael Brown, was shot and killed by a white police officer. In Ferguson, law enforcement responded aggressively, with armored vehicles, sniper rifles, and tear gas, which only escalated the long-simmering tensions between the police force and the city's Black residents.

Terry credits the protesters in Ferguson with catalyzing the Black Lives Matter movement and the waves of Black activism that followed. He cites a growing recognition among white and non-Black people — bolstered by the flood of cellphone videos documenting police abuse — that police brutality, which has disproportionately harmed Black people, is more widespread than they may have previously believed, and that an unchecked and increasingly militarized police force puts other citizens at risk as well.

The current unrest also is being fueled by the dire economic and public health consequences of the coronavirus, said Chad Williams, chair of the Department of African and African American Studies at Brandeis University. Millions of Americans are out of work, frustrated and anxious about the future. The virus has once again laid bare the staggering health disparities affecting Black people and other people of color, who are more likely to get sick and die from COVID-19.

“What we’re seeing today is really the culmination of a lack of trust and deep disillusionment in American democracy . . . and the belief that the nation state and the government is capable of responding to the needs of all of its citizens,” Williams said. “We’ve been dealing with the ravages of death and despair for months leading up to George’s killing, and I think what that really triggered was a sense that we, in some sense, have nothing to lose at this point.”

Peter Levy, a history professor at York College of Pennsylvania and an expert on the civil rights movement, agreed: “I think there’s a sense that things are falling apart to a certain extent. People are losing lives. People are losing their jobs. The next thing that may happen is people may start losing their homes. . . . I think those things have combined to maybe have led to something different.”

Meanwhile, President Trump’s rhetoric and policies have only fanned the flames of outrage, according to Williams, as evidenced by the ongoing protests in Washington, D.C. Tensions between protesters and the president boiled over on June 1, when federal law

enforcement officers forcefully cleared hundreds of peaceful demonstrators from

Lafayette Square with pepper balls and smoke canisters, so the president could [stage a photo op](#) at nearby St. John's Episcopal Church.

“We have a president occupying the White House who ran on a campaign of racial division, of so-called ‘law and order,’ of anti-Blackness, and that has certainly borne out over the past three-plus years,” Williams said. “This is really, I think, the culmination of a presidency which at every step has been determined to demonize people of color and to make them feel they are not just less than citizens, but less than human.”

The questions now are whether the energy and ideals guiding the current protests will translate into lasting reform, and if white and non-Black allies of the movement will move beyond performative activism and support transformative policy solutions.

“These problems are so deeply rooted in our history, we have to understand this is going to take tremendous effort from all of us as individuals, but also collectively to carry this out,” said David Krugler, an author and professor of modern American history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. “That’s where the challenge lies for allies of the movement, for those with privilege and those of us who are white.”

Indeed, that privilege kindles unease among some observers who too often have seen white voices centered during moments of cultural reckoning at the expense of Black and brown experiences. It happened most recently in 2017, during the #MeToo movement, when the original conversations about the pervasiveness of sexual assault and harassment largely excluded women of color. Even the phrase “Me Too,” coined a decade earlier by Tarana Burke, a Black activist who’d long worked with survivors of sexual violence, was frequently credited to a white actress who posted the hashtag on Twitter.

Jahki Dean, 20, an incoming junior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, attended the vigil and protest in Franklin Park on June 2 with his father and cousins. An aspiring lawyer from Dorchester, Dean, who is Black, said he was glad to see so many white faces at the protests in and around Boston recognizing and wielding their privilege

white men at the protests in and around Boston, recognizing and rejecting their privilege to support the current movement.

“People out there are starting to realize what’s going on — stepping out of their own little world in the suburbs and stepping into reality,” he said. But he’s worried that some white people think posting a [black square](#) on Instagram or sharing a hashtag on social media is a replacement for the long and difficult work of activism.

“It’s like, ‘OK cool,’ but that’s just you acting like you’re in solidarity with us. But what are you actually doing to change yourself or change others around you?” Dean said. “The fight is not going to stop after posting a picture or posting a little story and forgetting about it. . . . You need to keep pushing until justice is served.”

Culpepper is optimistic that institutional change may be on the horizon. “Every little victory gives you a glimmer of hope,” he said.

In Floyd’s case, the Minneapolis police officer who pinned Floyd to the ground, with his knee on his neck for almost nine minutes, [was charged](#) with second-degree murder. The three other officers who were on the scene were charged with aiding and abetting murder. On Sunday, news broke that a veto-proof majority of the Minneapolis City Council intends to [disband](#) the police department.

The FBI also has [opened an investigation](#) into the death of Breonna Taylor, the 26-year-old Black woman who was killed in her sleep in March, when Louisville, Ky., police stormed into her apartment unannounced and shot her eight times while exchanging gunfire with her boyfriend. The narcotics suspect police were searching for had already been arrested at the time. The Louisville Metropolitan Police Department’s chief [was fired](#) June 1 after officers fatally shot a local Black restaurateur, David McAtee, during protests in that city. The two officers involved in the shooting had not turned on their body cameras.

Three white men are also now being [charged with murder](#) for their roles in the February killing of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who was chased by drivers in two pickup trucks and gunned down while jogging through a south Georgia neighborhood.

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“The prayer now is that this action turns into not just legislative change, but cultural and systemic change,” Culpepper said. “Otherwise, not much changes.”

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