

# Racial Inequalities in Baltimore City and Its Reflection in Diverse News Media Coverage after the 2015 Unrest Around Freddie Gray's Death

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*Racial inequalities in social and economic outcomes in Baltimore City were manifested through a violent protest on April 27, 2015 around the death of a young African-American man, Freddie Gray, in police Custody. Therefore, utilizing the textual analysis method and the theory of framing, this study seeks to understand how three types of newspapers—mainstream national, ethnic/community, and local—covered the systemic issues and underlying causes of racial inequalities and injustice in Baltimore City. These newspapers brought up issues of racial inequalities in Baltimore such as unequal economic opportunities, lack of infrastructure for economic mobility, lack of quality education in Black-majority neighborhoods, and illegal drug businesses in impoverished areas in the absence of jobs.*

**Keywords:** racial inequalities, media diversity, African Americans, ethnic media, systemic issues

## Introduction

Both U.S. and international media widely covered the protests or “riots” in Baltimore City on April 27, 2015, centering around the death of Freddie Gray, a young African-American man from the city’s impoverished neighborhood, in police custody. The news coverage exposed not only violent reactions to police brutality on a young African-American man but also racial and economic inequalities in Baltimore City (Lopez, 2016; Robinson, 2016). Consequently, after such

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negative coverage in the media, city authorities, residents, and local organizations took initiatives to reject violence or destructive forms of protest, to address the distrust between the police and African Americans, and to initiate discussions on the issues of frustration with community leaders and the city's underprivileged populations. Hence, this study examines the text of the 2-week-long news coverage of inequities in Baltimore City in the aftermath of protests or "riots" on April 27, 2015.

Depending on the nature of their publication, coverage of an event can vary among different types of news outlets in terms of highlighting certain aspects of the event over others (Biswas, 2014; Ramasubramanian, Doshi, & Saleem, 2017). Therefore, this study explores how three types of newspapers—mainstream national, ethnic/community, and local newspapers—covered situations and events in Baltimore, a U.S. city in the State of Maryland, after a violent protest on April 27, 2015, around the death of Freddie Gray. An analysis of the same event or phenomenon from multiple perspectives in the multicultural society of the United States, in this case, diverse media sources, can help us to identify priorities among different media coverage and understand an event thoroughly.

Recent studies on media coverage of racialized policing have focused mainly on the protest events, racial justice campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter, and victims of police brutality (Mills, 2017; Moody-Ramirez & Cole, 2018; Perry, 2014; Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2017). In contrast, this study focuses on how various types of media cover situations and events, including image building initiatives by city residents, community, and local administration, and their efforts to identify underlying causes of distrust between a section of city residents and the police.

### **Baltimore City on April 27, 2015**

Violent protest incidents, such as setting a police car on fire, damaging other cars on city streets, vandalizing shops, looting by opportunists, burning a business and an establishment down, street battles between police and a group of violent protestors, and the city's mayor losing her temper and calling violent protestors "thugs" were the highlights of the events in Baltimore City on April 27, 2015 (Ortiz, 2015; Tkacik, 2018). However, there is a lack of agreement on how people would like to describe these violent events. Therefore, Christina Tkacik (2018), a reporter of *The Baltimore Sun*, in her report, "Remembering the Baltimore riots after Freddie Gray's death, 3 years later," used three terms—"unrest," "uprising," and "riots"—to describe the city's situation on April 27, 2015. Therefore, in this paper, the terms "violence," "unrest," "riot," or "rioting," or "uprising" will be used to refer to the happenings on April 27, 2015 in Baltimore city. The following paragraph includes a summary of events leading up to the violence on April 27, 2015 in Baltimore City.

Freddie Gray, a young African-American man, was picked up by the police on April 12, 2015 from his West Baltimore neighborhood for allegedly possessing a

switchblade knife (Ortiz, 2015). Gray sustained a spinal injury in the police van and was later taken to hospital. On April 19, 2015, Gray was pronounced dead (Ortiz, 2015). After Gray's death, six police officers involved with the event were suspended and protests began to take place and spread around the city.

In the backdrop of growing protest and criticisms against the use of excessive force and racially biased policing in the arrest of Freddie Gray, the U.S. Justice Department announced a federal investigation into Gray's death. Protests were largely peaceful as well as emotional before April 27, 2015. Gray's funeral took place on April 27 and violence broke out in different parts of the city after the funeral (Ortiz, 2015).

### **Economic and Racial Inequalities in Baltimore City**

According to a Brookings Institution report, the state of the community-police relationship and criminal justice system in Baltimore were not the only contributing factors to the massive uprising against racial injustice in 2015, the "economic and social context" had much to do with it, too (Berube & McDearman, 2015, para 1). Although overall Baltimore was relatively an affluent city with many job opportunities in and around the city, the city's prosperity did not reach every neighborhood and across racial lines (Berube & McDearman, 2015).

Baltimore is a Black-majority city since African-American residents make up 63% of the city's population, but the plight of the Black Community in Baltimore city is worse than the national average for African Americans "on nearly every outcome measure" including health, education, and employment (Asante-Muhammad, 2017, p. 3). Whites that constitute 28% of the city's population do much better than national averages on social and economic outcomes (Asante-Muhammad, 2017). Racial disparity between Blacks and Whites in Baltimore in terms of household incomes, unemployment rate, and educational attainment is very clear. An average White household (62,705 dollars) makes twice the income of an average Black household (33,801 dollars) while unemployment rate is three times higher among communities of color (Black 14%, Latino 7%) compared to Whites (4%) and completion of college or bachelor's degree is four times lower among Blacks (13%) compared to Whites (51%) (Asante-Muhammad, 2017). Although African Americans comprised a little over 60% of the city's population, "almost 85% of those incarcerated in 2014 were African Americans" and "[t]his disparity is of even greater . . . when considering the long-term economic consequences . . . wages grow at a 21% slower rate for Black former inmates compared to White former inmates" (Asante-Muhammad, 2017, p. 6; Lyons & Pettit, 2011). In terms of access to health care/health insurance, the gap between Black and White communities in the city in 2014 was much lower than the year 2009, because of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare). Still little over 10% of city's Black community did not have access to health insurance in contrast to 7% of city's White residents (Baltimore City Health Department, 2014).

**Structural Racism, Power, and the Media**

The racial gap in various social indicators is not unique to Baltimore City. A wide racial gap between Black and White Americans in important social indicators, such as education and employment, has been a national trend (Ajilore, 2020; Johnson, 2019). Based on data from 1991 to 2016, a study concluded that even after obtaining college education African Americans and Latinos were outnumbered by White Americans in good-paying jobs (Johnson, 2019). Similarly, unemployment data from 1972 to 2019 suggest that “Black unemployment is consistently twice the white unemployment rate” (Ajilore, 2020). Alden Loury (2019b) describes such widening and sustaining racial gap in a society as “structural racism,” which “is a complex web of policies and practices that produce and reinforce inequalities by race” (p. 31). Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) bring in the influence of elites’ power on the system or policies that regulate justice system, access to and distribution of resources such as education, health care, and employment. Therefore, Lopez-Narbona (2019) argues that dominant racial group’s ideology in the policymaking process can be resulted in the unequal distribution of resources in a society. Hence, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) observe that the underlying cause of racial inequalities in the United States is systemic because of its relation to power relations and the pattern of power.

Disproportionate rates of incarceration in a community have severe consequences since they affect family members and their wealth (Sykes & Maroto, 2016). Not only that, but the situation also becomes acute when a Black incarcerated person has a lesser chance of getting a job than a White counterpart (Loury, 2019b). In addition, lack of access to quality education among the communities of color can make them less competitive for employment opportunities. The economic determinant of the school system, where the wealth of a neighborhood influences the quality of school education, creates a structural barrier for low-income neighborhoods to grow academically as well as economically (Loury, 2019b). Likewise, interrelated factors such as lower wages, less stable jobs, or lack of good employment opportunities and small to no savings among African Americans affect their access to mortgage and tax benefits (Hanks, Solomon, & Weller, 2018). This discussion of inequity is relevant to Glenn Loury’s “development bias” (Loury, 2019a), which refers to the obstacles that restrict Black people from gaining access to the resources essential for human development.

Since a few companies own the majority of the media organizations (Bramlett-Solomon & Carstarphen, 2017), there is a concern that media outlets can be used to advance dominant and powerful groups’ economic and political agendas, with the experiences of marginalized communities being sidelined (McChesney, 2008). It is argued that media ownership by an elite few can shape the framing of economic and social issues from an elitist perspective (Grisold & Theine, 2017). Consequently, when it comes to economic news, the issues of finance, stock market, or unemployment rate receives more attention in the news coverage than

the causes of social inequalities (Grisold & Theine, 2017). Often, poverty was portrayed as a threat in the U.S. news media because of its association with criminality; by doing so, the media also reinforced negative stereotypes about the communities of color and low-income Americans (Entman, 1995). Another weakness in the major mainstream media organizations' news coverage of poverty or social inequalities was that they are largely event-oriented not cause or theme-oriented. For example, the news media placed responsibility of poverty on individuals than on systemic causes (Bullock, Fraser, & Williams, 2001; Chauhan & Foster, 2014; Gilens, 1996; Iyengar, 1990; Redden, 2011). Such skewed coverage can potentially reinforce political and social inequalities in a society (Grisold & Theine, 2017). The media historically portrayed poor African Americans as undeserving, and by offering such coverage, it created a negative opinion among many about the welfare system (Gilens, 1999).

### **Power of News Text and Framing**

Since this study employs the textual analysis method to identify themes in the news coverage in a comparative media context, a section of literature review is focused on the power of text and news framing. Another section of review will focus on how local and community/ethnic newspapers can cover an issue/event differently from a mainstream news outlet.

News is also described as “constructed reality” and “cultural arm of the industrial order” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 158) since journalists and media owners' and sponsors' socioeconomic backgrounds and interests can influence the decision on what stories they cover and how they present them (Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). Therefore, legal and economic factors and, sometimes, both covert and overt forms of censorship can impact the production of news (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 2013). Although the media outlets do not primarily define a news event, their relationship with people in power for easy access to official information influences how news is crafted and framed (Hall et al., 2013). Hence, media can disseminate messages from individuals who hold powerful positions and who already have a voice in policymaking and a position of authority. There is always a likelihood that a news story can be skewed toward a certain angle of an issue/event, and it is where the discussion on the theory of framing comes into play.

Framing is a process of organizing a message/text where an emphasis is placed on one aspect of an issue over several other aspects (Entman, 1993). An analysis of the use of keywords, phrases, and use of certain types of information sources over others can help a text analyst identify which aspect of an issue is emphasized over others. Since a journalistic process can be shaped by individuals or ideological and institutional factors and social experiences, news framing needs to be evaluated in a broad context (Schudson, 1978). Journalists use identification/labels to refer to social contexts that are familiar to the audience, and, in this way, they assign meaning to an event (Hall et al., 2013, p. 57).

Using framing techniques and certain types of sources over others, media coverage can impact the way people think and structure their opinions about an issue/event. News coverage on an issue across various types of news media varies based on journalists' personal backgrounds, diversity in newsrooms, and media market or audience demographics (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

In this research context, it is assumed that mainstream newspaper coverage will vary, to some extent, from local newspaper coverage. Similarly, as both mainstream and local newspapers serve the general audience and tend to treat their audience with diverse identities as a monolithic group (Biswas, 2014), their coverage will likely be different from that of African-American newspapers or ethnic news outlets. Unlike general audience/mainstream media outlets, ethnic newspapers primarily serve the members of an ethnic group (Azocar & Funabiki, 2008).

### Mainstream versus Local versus Ethnic Newspapers

Local newspaper reporters are in an advantageous position than mainstream newspaper journalists if the latter's organizations are not located in a town/city that they cover. Mainstream newspapers may have local correspondents in major cities/towns, but they may not cover local and community issues as extensively as their counterparts in local newspapers (McLaughlin, 2017). Unlike journalists in mainstream news outlets, local media journalists know their community and issues better (McLaughlin, 2017; Pew Research Center, 1998). They have better access to a wide range of news sources. Therefore, there is a likelihood that local newspaper coverage can reflect a local/community issue deeper than mainstream newspaper coverage.

Likewise, ethnic newspapers know their community better since the scope of their operation and focus of their coverage is narrower than mainstream newspapers. In the United States, major ethnic newspapers represent ethnic minority groups such as Hispanic/Latino Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Since a young African-American man was the victim in the Baltimore incident in 2015 and a large number of African-American protestors participated in the protests, this study considers *The Afro's* coverage. There has been a debate around whether or not mainstream media can extensively present underlying causes of frustrations among African Americans. Part research found that African Americans receive scanty coverage of their achievements while they are overrepresented in the coverage of negative activities such as crimes (Martindale & Dunlap, 1997). Therefore, a popular African-American news outlet must be considered when the issue has to do with the realities of the Black community in the United States. Also, since mainstream news media treat their audiences with diverse backgrounds as a homogenous group, their news coverage often misses the deeper perspective and extensive coverage about an ethnic group (Peterson, 2010). Compared to ethnic newspapers, mainstream newspapers look for sensationalism in news events and, therefore, their coverage reflects political interests and conflict between groups (Biswas, 2014).

Whether ethnic or mainstream newspaper, the coverage about race should focus on the “flaws in American society” rather than an emphasis on “problems of black people” (West, 2001, p. 3), since societal flaws are rooted in persisting cultural stereotypes and inequities in society. Therefore, this study explores this broad research question:

**RQ:** How differently and similarly did national mainstream newspapers, a leading local general-interest newspaper and a local ethnic newspaper (i.e., Black newspaper), cover the issues of racial inequalities and injustice after the violent protests against the death of Freddie Gray in April 2015?

## Method

This study utilizes the textual analysis method to examine the news coverage in three types of newspapers *after* violent protests on April 27, 2015. Textual analysis is also known as discourse analysis. Textual analysis is a method of critically analyzing texts to generate meaning. It is argued that discourse or textual analysis is a systematic way of explaining a text with focus on how they are written and their functions/implications (van Dijk, 1991). Textual/discourse analysts look for a connection between text and social and/or ideological contexts to explain journalists’ choice of certain framing—organization of information and details with certain tones (Billig, 1997; van Dijk, 1991).

## Sample

The sample of this study includes a total of 136 news stories published in online editions of four newspapers; of them, 79 stories were published in two mainstream leading national newspapers in the United States, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, 36 stories were published in a large Maryland state/local newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*, and 21 stories were published in Baltimore-based African-American newspaper, *The Afro*, between April 29, 2015 and May 12, 2015. Since a majority of April 28th’s news coverage was about violence or riots that took place in Baltimore City on April 27, this study did not include stories from April 28 in the sample.

Two of these newspapers—*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—are known as opinion-leading news outlets in the United States (Ten Eyck & Williment, 2003). *The Baltimore Sun* is a Baltimore-based local newspaper with large circulation in the State of Maryland. According to the Baltimore Sun Media Group’s website on May 23, 2018, the newspaper site received 5.6 million unique visitors each month in 2016 and, in 2014, the printed version of the newspaper had a circulation of over 386,000. *The Afro*, also known as Afro American, is a leading ethnic news outlet that is geared toward African Americans in Baltimore and D.C. metropolitan area. *The Afro* is also the “longest running African American newspaper in the U.S” (BlackNews.Com, n.d.). *The Afro* is the only paper in this sample

that was published weekly. Moreover, since Freddie Gray was a young African-American man, it is relevant to analyze the coverage of an African-American newspaper.

Stories of *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* are downloaded from the National Newspapers database while *The Afro* stories were downloaded from the Ethnic Newswatch database. For the initial search on these databases, search terms “Freddie Gray,” “Baltimore,” “unrest,” or “riot” were used. The author went through all the news published between April 29 and May 12, 2015 in each newspaper to identify relevant stories that focused on the city’s racial inequalities and the initiatives and events following the violence on April 27.

## Analysis

The analysis phase of this study followed the techniques of generating meaning from texts as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 245): (1) identifying patterns and themes, (2) seeing whether conclusions about text looks “reasonable and evidence-based” and (3) grouping related patterns/themes in text. The theory of framing that explores central organizing idea in a message was utilized to identify patterns and themes around racial inequalities in news text. In doing so, quotes, sentences and use of words will be analyzed whether certain aspect over others was emphasized in a story. In reporting about the themes in the findings section, information, e.g. quotes, of selected stories from the sample will be utilized as evidences.

## Findings

### Ethnic Newspaper Coverage

Two major themes were derived from textual analysis of *The Afro* stories: (1) non-violent, peaceful protest for justice and (2) systemic issues and underlying causes of unrest in Baltimore.

#### *Nonviolent, peaceful protest for justice*

One of the key themes identified across the newspapers is the rejection of violence and destruction in the name of protest/demand for justice in Freddie Gray’s death. City residents, community leaders and organizations, and advocacy groups and local administrators denounce violence or violent protests that took place on April 27, 2015 in Baltimore City, which got negative coverage in both U.S. and international media. As is manifested in textual elements of news stories—quotes, words, and sentences—the overwhelming message is that violence and taking advantage of violence to loot from local businesses cannot help the cause of seeking justice against racial bias and the use of excessive force by the law enforcing agency. Simultaneously, there is an urge for a nonviolent, peaceful protest for seeking justice.



Although community members understand the frustration around Freddie Gray's death and the longstanding trust issue with police, their sentiment as reported in mainstream media is very negative about the violent form of protest. A story in *The Afro* headlined "Baltimore tensions calming" includes a quote from a city resident about the implication of violence, "You're getting your pride and respect taken and you can't do anything about it" (Alejandro, 2015b). Another quote from a local community leader Catherine Pugh, included in the above story, reflects another sentiment regarding violence as a form of protest:

I just want our community to understand that we understand their frustration, but violence certainly is not the way . . . And that we're going to work, in terms of just trying to make sure we bring justice, not just for Mr. [Freddie Gray] but for anyone and everyone who's had to be victims of this kind of crime. (Alejandro, 2015b)

Bishop Walter Scott Thomas of the New Psalmist Baptist Church thinks that looting and burning cannot change a practice of injustice or unjust law/regulations as he states, "Freddie's death is going to light a match, not of looting and burning, but [that] laws could change" (Alejandro, 2015a). Another story, "Mothers Stand Against Police Shootings of Blacks" (2015) includes State's Attorney for Baltimore, Marilyn Mosby's call for a peaceful protest: "To those who are angry, hurt, I urge you to channel energy peacefully. I heard your call for 'no justice, no peace'. However your peace is severely needed."

Another story in *The Afro* uses the quote of Freddie Gray's cousin, Tavon Cotton, who reiterates the plea for peaceful protests, "The busting up windows and trashing everything... at the end of day, people have to clean that up . . . I just want an investigation. I'm hoping for change" (Williams, 2015). They also ran a story on singer Prince's announcement at the Baltimore concert to honor Freddie Gray. To promote peace after the violence on April 27, 2015 in Baltimore City, Prince named the concert "Rally for Peace."

Violence and looting can not only make a dent on the process of making a meaningful change and a demand for justice but also affect economic activities. In "After the Cleanup" story, *The Afro* reporter Natalie Sherman (2015) interviewed Marc Attman, owner of the Attman's Delicatessen on Lombard Street in Baltimore downtown. According to Attman, as reported in the story, "After Monday's rioting, Attman's Delicatessen lost a catering event, about \$1,000 in convention-related sales and half its usual Tuesday sales." Sherman (2015) wrote, "But Attman, whose family's 100-year-old shop survived a fire set in the 1968 riots, is worried about something more insidious than those immediate losses."

#### *Systemic issues or underlying causes of unrest*

*The Afro* ran a number of stories in early May 2015, to report as to why a section of Baltimore residents are unhappy with the police. Some of those reports bring

up the issues of economic inequality in a part of the city neighborhoods. Sources quoted in those stories reflect a common observation that people's frustration grew over a period of time as they find urban development and law enforcement unequal and unjust; not all neighborhoods in Baltimore have access to economic and quality educational opportunities. For example, Jones (2015) wrote a report, "Community stretches to find peace with police," where fundamental issues of the African-American community were covered in the backdrop of Freddie Gray's death. While covering the distrust between the police and city residents, *The Afro's* report used a quote from motivational speaker and BET TV personality, Jeff Johnson: "You don't even begin to have trust restored until police officers go to jail . . . If we continue to send police officers to control communities versus to serve them, there will be no trust" (Jones, 2015). The same story also covered a comment of TV One journalist Roland Martin: "The concentration of police officers in Baltimore is higher than cities with much larger populations" (Jones, 2015). The same report also included an observation from a retired police officer who said, "The cops inherit a system that is racist and look at the Black people as potential threats and as suspicious."

In another story, Alejandro (2015b) used a comment of a community leader Catherine Pugh:

I think that as we look at moving forward, we've got to think about what this community needs. You can see the [boarded-up] houses in the community, you can see the need for jobs, and job training, and wealth creation in these neighborhoods.

*The Afro* correspondent reached out to interview gang members to know their roles in "Baltimore uprising." In that report, causes of frustration among a section of city residents came up. As Alejandro (2015c) quoted a gang member: "They have to put people in leadership that are actually in those communities. [Take] the mayor. The mayor, she doesn't come out in these communities. She doesn't build relationships with these actual people."

#### Local Newspaper Coverage

Similar to *The Afro's* coverage, *The Baltimore Sun* covered a number of stories based on interviews, events, and initiatives that explored and discussed underlying causes of April unrest in Baltimore, distrust between the police and African-American community, improvement of the Baltimore Police Department, and inequality in Baltimore city.

#### *Systemic and underlying causes of unrest*

*The Baltimore Sun* ran a story on May 6, 2015, titled "U.S. attorney general vows 'real solutions'" since the Justice Department decided to examine "the best options

to improve the Baltimore Police Department in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death" (Puente & Knezevich, 2015).

Another story brought up how an advocacy group or a lobbyist waited for the Baltimore unrest to release their study on the economic benefits of the Red Line rail system that will connect West and East Baltimore (Cox, 2015). Since lack of jobs in impoverished neighborhoods in East and West Baltimore causes frustrations and encourages illegal activities, building of the rail system will not only help with economic mobility in the long term but will also bring in construction jobs for the short term. While covering a celebratory rally in reaction to the State Attorney's charge against police officers allegedly responsible for Freddie Gray's death, *The Baltimore Sun* also reported that some rally participants voiced against injustice and poverty in Baltimore city (Broadwater, Dresser, & Wenger, 2015).

The then Baltimore City Mayor, Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, launched the "One Baltimore" campaign to address persistent city problems. The mayor asked business and religious leaders and nonprofits to join her initiative. A Baltimore story ran her comment about the "One Baltimore" initiative, "This is an opportunity for us to focus more intensely on systemic problems that have faced our city for decades, if not generations" ("Rawlings-Blake announces 'One Baltimore' campaign," 2015). Furthermore, Donnell Spivey, president of the National Association of Real Estate Brokers and a Baltimore real estate agent, organized a gathering of entrepreneurs and business owners at the First Shiloh Baptist Church in early May to "help West Baltimore communities, including efforts to stop discrimination by contractors, banks and insurance companies" (Broadwater, 2015).

*The Baltimore Sun* published stories about community organizations' and city's initiatives to promote peace and unity and organize healing events for violence-torn city residents. For example, *The Baltimore Sun* ran a story on famous American singer Prince's concert where the writers mentioned, "Prince's concert after the violent protest and riots in Baltimore was part of a collected effort to bring peace and unity to the city of Baltimore. Prince left a message to pause and reflect on what had happened in Baltimore" (Wenger & Case, 2015). The story included a quote from a concert attendee, "City needed little joy and some moments for healing. Music can work like a medicine."

#### *Peaceful protest for justice and healing*

In addition, in relation to racial justice and trauma associated with "riots" and "violence," similar to *The Afro's* news coverage, *The Baltimore Sun* published news stories highlighting peaceful initiatives to bring the community together and for addressing racial injustice.

Since people lost their closed ones, businesses during the April 27 violence, kids/teens were traumatized or "terrorized." *The Baltimore Sun* ran a story, "Stress of Baltimore unrest could remain for a while" (McDaniels, 2015b). The report documented how school teachers listened to their students about their anger, stress, and sadness with rioting events and violence. It also mentioned the importance of

counseling programs in Baltimore area schools. As a supporting detail, this report used a quote from Baltimore's Health Commissioner Dr. Leana Wen, "We know that trauma is already everywhere in our communities. Our families who are exposed to rampant violence, health disparities and significant poverty face it every day. This latest traumatic event will only make things worse." *The Baltimore Sun* also ran another story on art and entertainment therapy. In that report, Case (2015) wrote:

As the city copes with the complex, continuing after-effects of Gray's death, [a school art teacher] and other members of Baltimore's eclectic visual arts and music communities are finding their own ways—from protest songs to paper art and more—to express their varied emotions.

### Mainstream Newspaper Coverage

Similar to local and Black newspaper coverage, two mainstream newspapers' coverage highlighted systemic issues and underlying causes of unrest in Baltimore. Since the policing approach is a much-debated issue in Baltimore and is responsible for the growing distrust between a section of city residents and law enforcers, *The New York Times* ran a story about the Justice Department's decision to examine Baltimore's Policing patterns (Apuzzo & Stolberg, 2015).

Distrust of the police is also manifested in another story where students shared fear about police presence in their schools. *The Washington Post* writer Emma Brown (2015, May 2) wrote:

Baltimore's unrest has helped show the world why some residents don't trust police on the streets. But that same distrust echoes in city schools, where officers stationed in hallways and classrooms are often perceived as posing a threat instead of serving as protectors.

Another story in *The New York Times* depicted another problem of Baltimore's impoverished neighborhood—illegal drug business. The *Times* story "A Hard but Hopeful Home to 'a Lot of Freddies'" began with "[...]at exactly the same time that the drug crew boss was resupplying his sales force on Thursday, a group of Sandtown men met in a church a few blocks away to consider how to prevent a repeat of the disorder on Monday, which included looting, rock-throwing, and extensive property damage, in response to Mr. Gray's death" (Shane, Stewart, & Nixon, 2015). While *The New York Times* story brought up the issue of policing practices and drug business in Baltimore, *The Washington Post* ran an in-depth story as to why an investment of 130 million dollars in West Baltimore's Sandtown in the 1990s did not bring any meaningful change and what helped the drug trade to flourish. Rosenwald and Fletcher (2015) explained:

The most significant problem, according to community organizers and the Enterprise report, was that new businesses and jobs never materialized. And

as Baltimore's decent-paying manufacturing jobs vanished—a problem shared by Detroit, Cleveland and other Rust Belt cities—there were fewer and fewer opportunities for Sandtown residents to find meaningful work. In the absence of jobs, the drug trade flourished.

*The New York Times* story shared the frustration of Anirban Basu, a local economist, who served on the city's school board for six years, with the riots and violence in Baltimore City. Violent protests did not help the city of Baltimore, which was already “battered by neglect.” “There was a lot of economic damage. But the greater damage is to the future. How many retailers will want to come to Baltimore? How many conventions will stay away? How many hotel rooms will stay empty?” (Shane, 2015, April 29).

## Discussion

Three types of news outlets offered systemic and underlying reasons for the unrest in Baltimore City following the death of Freddie Gray in police custody in April, 2015. As discussed in the “Structural Racism, Power, and the Media” section of this paper, structural racism is manifested through unequal economic opportunities between White and Black Americans and lack of quality education in Black-majority neighborhoods (Loury, 2019b). Powerful political and economic elites that create laws and regulate policy practices tend to serve and reflect the dominant social group's competitiveness while excluding the interests of the marginalized group (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Lopez-Narbona, 2019). The idea of development bias (Loury, 2019a) that creates barriers for Black neighborhoods from accessing essential skills and resources to be successful is an outcome of structural racism and a racist pattern in power relations (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Lopez-Narbona, 2019). Therefore, while covering racial inequalities, mainstream, ethnic, and local general-interest newspapers brought up the reasons such as lack of infrastructure for economic mobility, jobs, and quality education in Black-majority neighborhoods that have perpetuated racial inequalities in Baltimore City. Consequently, illegal drug businesses reigned in the impoverished areas in the absence of jobs. These news outlets also brought up the distrust between the police and the Black community.

Despite the similarities in the coverage in terms of theme, *The Afro's* news coverage stood out, in terms of tone, from the ones of general-audience local and mainstream/national newspapers. *The Afro* as ethnic media had access to community members who are the victims of the unequal distribution of resources and who had a longstanding frustration with policing, criminal justice system, and the unequal access to resources for growth. Therefore, *The Afro* presented the voices of the community members through the stories that highlighted structural racism and racial inequalities. On the contrary, a leading local newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun's* coverage of the systemic issue was rather shallow. They relied heavily on official and organizational sources. As a community news outlet, *The*

*Afro*, compared to *The Baltimore Sun*, might have better access to the members of the Black community in Baltimore. This distinction is important since a diverse media landscape can offer more and nuanced perspectives about an issue at stake.

Unlike two local newspapers—*The Afro* and *The Baltimore Sun*—two national newspapers did not highlight the peaceful protest and community dialogue initiatives in the days following the violent protest in Baltimore which received negative coverage nationally and globally. Local news outlets highlighted how peaceful protest and community outreach/dialogue initiatives were geared toward bringing the communities together and building trust. Through *The Afro*, Black community members shared that violence is not the way to realize racial justice. Mainstream media were criticized for highlighting the violent part of the protest while downplaying the city's and its communities' peaceful initiatives for better human understanding and finding pathways to resolve longstanding racial inequalities (Eichensehr & Popper, 2015). As argued in an earlier section, mainstream media owned by few conglomerates can shape the narrative about powerless (i.e., protesters) and sensationalism around the event (Bullock et al., 2001; Gilens, 1996; McChesney, 2008), even though they brought up the underlying reasons of racial divide in Baltimore.

## **Conclusions**

All three types of newspapers—national mainstream, local, and Black—covered racial inequalities in Baltimore city through a common theme in their respective news coverage—systemic issues and underlying causes of unrest. Subthemes of the inequality theme included unequal economic opportunities, lack of infrastructure for economic mobility, lack of quality education in Black-majority neighborhoods, and illegal drug businesses in impoverished areas in the absence of jobs.

As West (2001) argued, it is important for media to look for flaws in society instead of Black people's problems. In the case of this coverage analysis, it is evident that by covering the underlying causes of unrest, all three types of newspapers bring up societal causes of frustration among Baltimore city protestors. Gandy, Kopp, Hands, Frazer, and Phillips (1997) argued that how news media represents Blacks and Whites in loss and gain situation matters. If a loss or disadvantageous status is attributed to racial identity, there will be lesser public support for a policy change. Instead, if racial inequalities are described as institutional outcomes, it is highly likely that there will be a positive public perception toward a policy change to address the unequal distribution of wealth and economy (Ash & Schmierbach, 2013), which is not always covered in-depth by mainstream news media (Preston & Grisold, 2017).

Since the violent nature of the protest against Freddie Gray's death on April 27, 2015 affected the city's image nationally and internationally, both local newspapers published news stories of harmful effects of violent protests, importance of peaceful protests, and initiatives to unite the community. Both *The Afro* and

*The Baltimore Sun* serve the African-American community in Baltimore. Hence, these publications highlighted the importance of peaceful protests for realizing the community's demand for racial justice while covering systemic issues and causes of frustrations in the Black community.

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