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Opinions

In Ferguson, a sense of being left behind

Protestors demonstrate in Ferguson on August 17, 2014. Riot police hurled tear gas and marched on rioters in Ferguson, the St Louis suburb wracked by race riots since police shot dead an unarmed black teenager on August 9. (Michael B. Thomas/AFP/Getty Images)



By **Eugene Robinson** Opinion writer August 18



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The fire this time is about invisibility. Our society expects the police to keep unemployed, poorly educated African American men out of sight and out of mind. When they suddenly take center stage, illuminated by the flash and flicker of Molotov cocktails, we feign surprise.

The proximate cause of the rioting in Ferguson, Mo., is

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the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown, who was stopped, a witness has said, by a white policeman for walking in the street rather than on the sidewalk. Officer [Darren Wilson](#) shot Brown at least six times, according to [a private autopsy](#) and, reportedly, [one conducted by the St. Louis County medical examiner](#). Two of those bullets struck him in the head.

Eugene Robinson writes a twice-a-week column on politics and culture, contributes to the PostPartisan blog, and hosts a weekly online chat with readers. In a three-decade career at The Post, Robinson has been city hall reporter, city editor, foreign correspondent in Buenos Aires and London, foreign editor, and assistant managing editor in charge of the paper's Style section. [View Archive](#)

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There we have the familiar narrative: another unarmed black man unjustly killed. Brown thus joins a long, sad list — Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, etc. — that seems to have no end.

This story line is unassailable. Anyone who thinks race is not a factor in these fatal encounters should have to cite examples of unarmed, young, white men being killed by trigger-happy police or self-appointed vigilantes. Names and dates, please.

But the violence in Ferguson tells of a deeper, more fundamental narrative about what African Americans have done, and what has been done to them, in the decades since the urban riots of the 1960s — the fire *last* time.

Tempted to conclude that nothing has changed? Please

Digger



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note that the [Missouri Highway Patrol commander](#), [brought in to bring proportion and discipline](#) to what had been a provocative local police response, is black. The attorney general who interrupted his Martha's Vineyard vacation to [order a Justice Department investigation](#) and a third autopsy is black. And, of course, the president and commander in chief — who also took time from a Vineyard holiday to address the crisis in Ferguson — is black.

Also note that this undeniable evidence of progress on the issue of race — which would have been unimaginable when Harlem exploded in 1964 over [the police shooting of a 15-year-old boy](#) — makes no apparent difference to the young men who have been rampaging through the streets of Ferguson.

Why not? Because the tremendous gains achieved by some African Americans have not just left some others behind but made their situation more desperate and hopeless than it was 50 years ago.

When the unrest in Ferguson is over, I predict that there will be a flood of ambitious journalism seeking to assess the status of black America. Most of this analysis will be ignored because it will so contradict what many Americans see every day with their own eyes.

Millions of African Americans took advantage of the opportunities created by the civil rights movement to

climb into the middle class — and in some cases far beyond, as exemplified by President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder.

Yet millions of other black Americans did not reach the middle class. This group, mired in poverty and dysfunction, finds the paths others took are blocked. They live in neighborhoods with failing schools that cannot prepare them for today's economy. Secure, high-paying blue-collar jobs are a thing of the past. Racial bias in policing means African Americans are much more likely to be arrested and jailed for minor nonviolent offenses, such as drug possession, than whites who commit the same crimes.

Increasingly, these African Americans who were left behind are invisible. Their neighborhoods either get gentrified — which means they can no longer afford to stay there — or simply bypassed by development. What happens in poor black neighborhoods has less and less to do with the everyday lives of middle-class Americans, white or black.

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Yet in Ferguson and other such pockets across the nation, millions of young black men and women grow up knowing that the deck is stacked against them. Did Michael Brown have a chip on his shoulder? Not according to his friends and family, although the

convenience store video suggests otherwise. Would it be understandable if he did? Might he have wondered if white kids, living in more affluent parts of town, routinely got hassled by the police for jaywalking?

Brown had no police record. He had graduated from high school. He was about to enter a technical college. Given where he came from, it's hard to do a whole lot better — and easy to do a whole lot worse.

Now that the streets are filled with incoherent rage — and the rioting must be strongly condemned — we can see Brown's struggle. Momentarily, at least. After the smoke clears, we will be blind once again.

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