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Baltimore riots highlight city's deprivation

Demetri Sevastopulo in Baltimore

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A boy plays on a Baltimore street in the neighbourhood where Freddie Gray was arrested

William Glover Bey on Monday starts work as a janitor at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. It might seem an odd move for the son of a man who played basketball for the Los Angeles Lakers. But it is less surprising when you discover that the father of five has spent more than a quarter of his life behind bars for drug crimes.

“Over 15 years of my life was spent in jail,” says Mr Bey, who sold drugs to support 12 siblings and cousins after his father abandoned the family. “I grew up in jail.”

Mr Bey is one of thousands of mostly black male ex-convicts who return to Baltimore each year after leaving prison. In some areas — particularly those where rioters clashed with police this week — half the African-American men in the neighbourhood are estimated to be without work. The odds are even worse for ex-cons such as Mr Bey because of the difficulty of being hired when you have a criminal record.

After the global financial crisis hit in 2007, the small business that Mr Bey set up after his final jail stint ran into trouble. “I found myself falling backwards very quickly [and] drugs came back into my life.”

His situation remained bleak until he came across Build (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), a group that helps people improve their housing, economic and schools environment. He started attending “Turnaround Tuesdays” meetings where Build taught him the skills and confidence to get a job.

Ojeda Hall, a Harvard-educated former banker who escaped the Baltimore ghetto with her mother as a girl, says Build realised that creating jobs was the only way to reduce the tensions that set the conditions for the violence that erupted this week.

The group listened to the views of 5,000 residents, including some who wanted help removing the type of drug gangs depicted in the Baltimore-set television series *The Wire* from the streets. Build sent pastors to ask the dealers what it would take to get them to stop.

“They said ‘what do you expect us to do? We have to feed our families’. They said ‘Pastor, if you can get us a job, not only will we get off the corner, we’ll keep the corner clear for you’,” says Ms Hall. “For us, the crime problem was a jobs problem.”

Mr Bey’s break came because of Build’s realisation that black men were tired of training programmes that never led to jobs. That sparked a push to convince local businesses, such as Johns Hopkins, to start hiring ex-offenders. While the numbers are small, the group has helped 35 of their 100 participants land jobs in recent months. And they have been talking to the president of Johns Hopkins University about trying to convince other companies to follow suit.

“When the business community takes on a problem, it can be extremely effective. It is just that for the most part, the business community has been absent,” says Ms Hall.

Build is just one group trying to reverse the economic decay in inner-city Baltimore. Near the church where the funeral service for Freddie Gray — the young black man whose death in police custody sparked the riots — was held, Joe Jones is also trying to help.

In practically the only well kept, modern building in the district, Mr Jones runs the Center For Urban Families, which tries to empower low-income families and help men play their roles as fathers — a crucial issue given that many have lost their own fathers to drugs, crime or death. He is teaching from experience gained after his father left what had been a comfortable family, turning him into a “latchkey kid” in the drug-ridden ghetto.

“I had been an altar boy,” says Mr Jones. “I went from not having sex, not smoking marijuana, not drinking alcohol straight to taking a hypodermic needle full of heroin and putting it in my vein.”

After 17 years in jail, he kicked his heroin habit. Through luck and perseverance he got a job at Baltimore's health department as a substance abuse councillor for pregnant women. He started urging contractors dealing with the department to hire unemployed men from the district — mainly because he realised that he could not help the women if they were going home every night to men who themselves were addicted to drugs.

“These damn women are pregnant by these guys who got the same kinds of issues. So I am struggling to get these women drug treatment,” he says. “But when I get off work, they are going back to these knuckleheads.”

It became clear that many of the men had trouble keeping jobs because of their problems. So he set up a programme — later an independent non-profit organisation — to provide courses and support networks to help them cope with the challenges of inner city life. Since 1999, about 27,000 people have signed up with a third of them finishing the courses. His work has earned him a position on President Barack Obama's task force on fatherhood and healthy families.

But, to explain the magnitude of the problems in the poorer Baltimore districts, he points to two pieces of data. In the three zip codes around the area where the riots occurred, there are 2,400 men who owe more than \$20m in child support, while the same areas are some of the top zip codes for ex-cons returning to Baltimore.

“How can a community absorb that number of men who are dealing with that level of [economic] depravity?” he says.

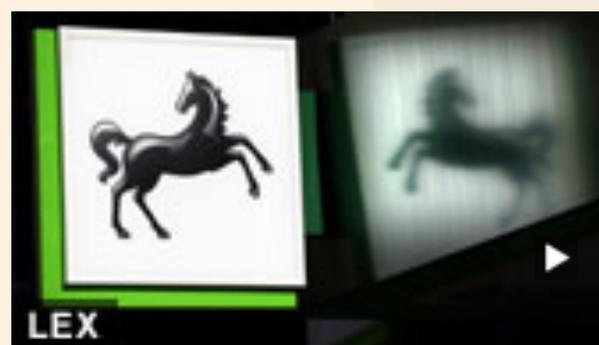
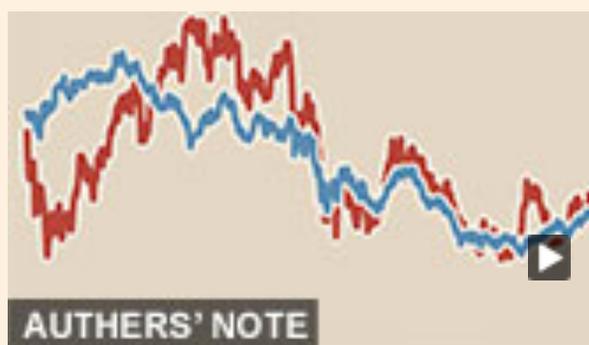
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- Joe Jones, Center For Urban Families

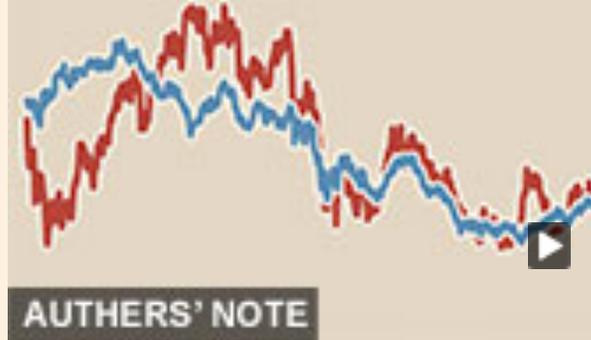




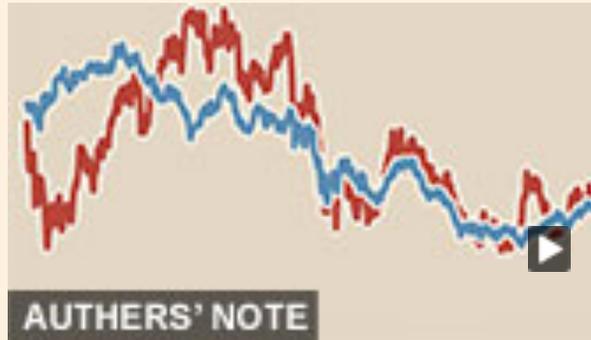
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