

Police Brutality Marches 1977

Beginning in 1961, a surge of police brutality and police murders scarred the landscape of New Orleans, directly impacting Civil Rights activists, and targeting individual blacks throughout the city.

Recurrent protests in defense of activists arrested for peacefully protesting, as when Reverend Avery Alexander was dragged by his ankles up two flights of stairs after integrating the cafeteria at City Hall, or individual victims of assault, as after Morris Rowe's brutal beating in 1963, spurred attempts at creating accountability through the formation of the community oversight organization Concerned Citizens on Police Matters of Police Brutality and Harassment (CCPM). But by 1967, the city's black leadership was up in arms as a new "stop and frisk" ordinance increased opportunities for harassment.



Reverend Avery Alexander of New Orleans is dragged feet first by police after an unsuccessful sit-in demonstration in City Hall in New Orleans on October 31, 1963. Source: Associated Press. Jim Bourdier.

The decade ended with both Great Society programs and police abuse concentrated in the isolated and increasingly poor black neighborhoods surrounding the housing projects. In 1965, Elizabeth Pope, a War on Poverty team chief for the Desire projects, was harassed and ticketed when she raised objections to an NOPD officer hitting a teenager with his nightstick; two years later she would be arrested in a similar incident. While Pope was held in isolation at the local precinct, news of her arrest spread and a mass of Desire residents surrounded the station in protest. Pope was released with a public apology and the officers were transferred.

As the Civil Rights Movement gave way to militancy and economic and physical conditions declined along with police relations in the poorest projects, New Orleans' chapter of the Black Panthers emerged as a new factor in local activism. Mayor Moon Landrieu and Police Chief Joseph Giarrusso assigned two NOPD officers, Melvin Howards and Israel Fields, to infiltrate the group. On September 15, 1970, the Panthers outed them and the officers were put on "trial" at Desire, before being released into an angry mob outside. Giarrusso sent two hundred officers to respond, but a mass of Desire residents defended the Panthers headquarters, pushing the police into a retreat. Giarrusso ordered the area sealed with barricades, while police evacuated residents in preparation for a full scale battle; seven people were shot, though none fatally, and fifteen Panthers were arrested.

Sources

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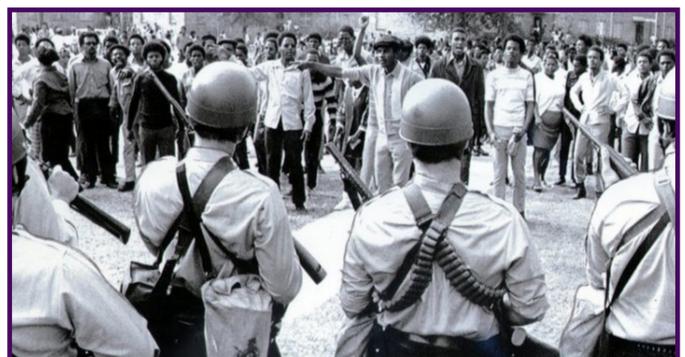
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Six demonstrators occupied Mayor Ernest Morial's office for three days in June 1981. From left are: Kalamu Ya Salaam, Macio Duncan, Cynthia Riley, Daniel Johnkin and Martin Lefstein. Source: The Times-Picayune archive

Two months later, NOPD again entered the Desire projects in an attempt to seize the Panthers; this time with two hundred officers in riot gear and an armored car. Two thousand residents of Desire formed a human shield and Giarrusso, recognizing the potential for a riot, attempted to negotiate the Panthers' surrender rather than risk escalating the situation. As night fell, the police retreated from the projects, leaving the Panthers in their headquarters. Six days later, NOPD would arrest twenty-nine Panthers and their supporters as they caravanned to a Washington DC Black Power Conference in rented cars, apprehending the remaining six at headquarters in a nighttime raid.



After a lengthy standoff outside the Desire projects between Black Panthers and NOPD, a 24-hour truce was called. November 1971. Source: The Times-Picayune / NOLA.com

The seventies saw mounting and often fatal conflict between the police and New Orleans' black residents; the murder of Edward Lee at the end of 1974, the murder of Charles Cheatham by undercover NOPD on Bourbon Street in April 1975 and back-to-back murders of Leo Brady and MacArthur Jones in June of that year. As the NAACP applied a legal strategy and NOPD Internal Affairs Division floundered, the grassroots People's Defense Coalition emerged with a new demand for public hearings on police brutality in City Council. Thousands showed up at City Hall on January 7, 1977 to demand that police brutality stop and new measures of accountability be put in place. During public debate over the establishment of a new oversight unit, Wayne Smith, a black tourist from Kansas, was killed by NOPD at a Carnival parade. Bill Rouselle and Kalamu ya Salaam organized a series of protests in response, with a funeral march from Orleans and Broad to police headquarters followed by marches to City Hall. Similar community accusations of police brutality and similar protests continue to date.