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A Black Lives Matter demonstration in suburban West Orange, New Jersey.
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In Suburbs and Small Towns, Racial Justice Takes Center Stage

Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. have spread far beyond major cities. Organizers say that suburbs are where

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Patrick Sisson

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Rochester, New York, with a largely White and well-off population. She understands what it was like being called racial slurs, not seeing yourself mirrored in the curriculum, and being the lone African-American student everyone looks at in as important to make the rest of her community understand these types of experiences.

The killing of George Floyd, and the outrage it generated, inspired her to co-organize a protest in Pittsford with her 18-year-old friend and former classmate Christina Mack. On June 10, nearly 200 people gathered in the town's Thornell Farm Park. For Brown and Mack, and many of the other organizers across the U.S. fueling this recent wave of activism, such gatherings represent hope for change. "Our generation is going to fix the problems of racial inequality," Brown says. "These are our lives we're protesting about. I'm fighting for my little brother. I don't want him to question his life because of the color of his skin."

"Everyone is realizing it's time to do more than sit back and be not racist," Mack says.

The engagement of Brown and others also represents one of the most striking aspects of the current protests against police violence in the U.S., compared with previous ones. They're everywhere, in suburbs and small towns as well as major cities. Count Love, a data-collecting effort launched in 2016 to document protest activity in the U.S., has cataloged more than 1,500 distinct racial justice events since George Floyd was killed on May 25, and the site's founders, Tommy Leung and Nathan Perkins, expect to add many more, since they have an extensive backlog of local media and reports to review. Even in the wake of the 2017 Women's March and widespread anti-gun actions in 2018, the physical scale of these Black Lives Matter protests is striking.

While it's challenging to generalize, given the sheer number of events that have and continue to take place, conversations with eight protest organizers, as well as historians and researchers, suggest some commonalities amid the vibrant, multiracial, and predominantly peaceful demonstrations taking place outside of large cities. They're often led by first-time organizers in their teens and 20s, often women, who have adapted the traditional models of urban-style political demonstrations to suburban sprawl or rural areas. And they've done so at incredible speeds by leveraging social media.

"One of the reasons we're seeing these protests in suburban and exurban places is because organizers don't need connections to movements or Black institutions or churches," says Ashley Howard, a historian and professor at the University of Iowa working on a book about urban rebellions of the '60s. "They already have networks in place through social media."

These protests also reflect the demographic shifts and diversification of U.S. suburbs and exurbs in recent decades, a challenge to the stereotype of a monochromatic suburbia. While much has been said about how unexpected it may be for the current wave of protests to have moved beyond urban centers, many organizers and activists say the suburbs – where many residents may not believe there are issues of systemic racism – are exactly where these protests belong.

Despite rainy weather, nearly 100 people turned out for the June 10 #BustUpTheSilence march in De Pere, Wisconsin, a suburb of Green Bay. The group gathered in a local park and marched for about five miles through the town, with

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safe, quiet White neighborhoods,” she says. “We need to keep having these conversations. There are really people in these neighborhoods who don’t get it, and don’t understand. There will be no peace until they all wake up.”

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kernel Commission report, a 1968 congressional study of the nationwide rebellions and unrest in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., 23% of uprisings in 1967 took place in communities smaller than 50,000 people. up 28% of all such events. “Any place African Americans have resided faced the same systemic racism,” says Howard.

Today’s American suburbia is more diverse than ever. The majority of children of color in the U.S. today are raised in suburban settings, says L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy, an associate professor of sociology of education at New York University. And suburbs have been the backdrop of many recent incidents of police brutality and racial violence: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia. “We haven’t seen suburban demographics activated like this,” he says of the protests. “This is an important moment for rethinking suburban politics, and getting rid of the notion that ‘suburban’ means ‘White.’ I hope this is a way to reorient this in the White imagination.”

Indya Smith-Johnson, a Black 18-year-old and recent graduate of Naperville Central High School, in the western suburbs of Chicago, says part of the backdrop to the successful protest march she organized on June 4, which drew more than 500 people, was a racist incident last fall, when a 14-year-old student posted a picture of his African-American classmate on Craigslist that said “Slave for Sale.” More personally, Smith-Johnson had also joined the NAACP in December, after her father was harassed by the police. As he was driving home one day, she says, an officer trailed him to his driveway and then approached him, claiming they had identified him as the same person on an out-of-state warrant from California. (The officer was wrong.) “My dad’s been an upstanding citizen of this town for over 30 years,” Smith-Johnson says. “If it could happen to him, it could happen to me.”

The quick, decentralized, social-media-powered nature of these protests also represents years of Black Lives Matter organizing efforts coming to fruition, says Howard. The movement has been criticized in the past for being leaderless and lacking central figures, but it has succeeded in popularizing a shared national vocabulary around systemic racism. And the grassroots, rapid response nature of the current wave of protest shows that the movement’s “leader-ful” approach can be extremely effective across a diverse range of American geographies.

Eduardo Mora, a college student at University Nebraska-Lincoln, kicked off the protest he organized via group chat. He’s been talking with his friends from his hometown of Madison, Nebraska, a predominantly Latino community of about 2,500 people, about the Floyd case. A son of Mexican immigrants, he knew what it was like to face discrimination. Around 11 p.m. on May 29, the idea for a protest came together and he started posting on Facebook and Instagram. By 10 a.m. the next day, hundreds of people had expressed interest; one commenter asked if he’d thought to contact the city. Mora cold-called Norfolk’s mayor, Josh Moenning, who voiced his support. Then the police chief called Mora and asked him to help. The protest later that day would draw 300 people to an intersection near Highway 81 in neighboring Norfolk.

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Norfolk, Nebraska, hosted a Black Lives Matter protest on May 30. (Photo courtesy Eduardo Mora)

Jessica Moore, a biracial 25-year-old from tiny Ullin, Illinois, also became a first-time protest organizer via a group chat. She often sees people post racist things on Facebook, and didn't want her 6-year-old, or any other Black child, to grow up scared. On June 3, she decided to organize a protest in nearby Anna, Illinois – notorious for being a "sundown town." The next day, after posting on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, she had 200 people marching through town.

In Havre, a town of roughly 10,000 in north-central Montana, between two Indian Reservations, Melody Bernard, a 45-year-old member of the Chippewa Cree tribe, also put together a protest via Facebook. As a mom, she says that the George Floyd video "sent chills" through her body, and as a former cop, she was "outraged" to see officers act like judges, juries and executioners. "This is a small town, so people can be scared of posting about and joining protests because it may offend people," says Bernard. "But this isn't about that anymore. This is about one man who was murdered in front of the eyes of millions of Americans."

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While social media catalyzed these small town and suburban protests, one important reason they succeeded was the way organizers adapted their tactics to a landscape of sprawl and strip malls. Mass visibility in suburbia often means using car-centric infrastructure as a stage: Protesters have organized car caravans or strategically positioned themselves near busy streets and intersections, as opposed to large city parks or public spaces, to get the attention of commuters. For Mora's protest in Nebraska, for example, marchers with signs positioned themselves on the Highway 81 intersection, near a Walgreens and CVS (both stores were boarded up, out of fear of looting, says Mora).

Gathering protesters near roadways can be risky – a post promoting the event attracted comments such as “you’re lucky I have to work or I’d run you over with my pick-up truck,” which is not an idle threat after a rash of similar vehicle attacks. But in suburbia, it’s key to visibility. “Our mentality was that we were doing this to send a message,” says Mora. “We even had truck drivers honk their horns in support as they drove by.”

For Smith-Johnson in Naperville, she chose to meet up beside the town’s local landmark – the Dandelion Fountain, located in a riverside park downtown – for speeches, later lining a heavily trafficked street nearby with homemade banners and signage. The idea was getting maximum visibility. “You see the Facebook comments about protests from people in the 30-to-50-year-old range, the ‘these kids need to get a job’ type. While it’s ridiculous, those are the people we want to inconvenience, who we want to eventually jump in the movement,” she says. “The more people we can get, the more who write to legislators, the more who make complaints so this can’t be swept under the rug. A lot of these protests are changing people’s perspectives. There is a diverse group of people living here, and it’s our city, too.”

Vanessa Lamb, 21, a nursing student at Rutgers who helped organize the Everybody vs. Racism event in her hometown of Gloucester City, New Jersey, on June 7, says she would “be lying if I said this wasn’t the scariest thing I’ve ever done.” It was relatively easy to coordinate with local police, and “planning the route was simple.” Organizers simply m

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Gloucester City, New Jersey's "Everybody Vs. Racism" march on June 7. (Photo: Tise Thomas)

It's clear from the organizers that these protests won't be one-off events. Smith-Johnson is planning a larger march set to travel between Naperville and Aurora, a city 10 miles west, and also participating in a Juneteenth event. Moore is already planning follow-up events in Anna and nearby southern Illinois towns. "I didn't know that going out and following my heart would do all this," she says. "It feels really good."

Lewis-McCoy is both energized by the increased activism – especially how more people are connecting issues such as police brutality, housing, and education to systemic racism – and worried about backlash. Counterprotests, such as the ones seen in Long Island, may create danger for attendees. The downside of protests that are assembled quickly is that, without planning or coordination with local officials, it can create unsafe conditions, where police may decide to take inappropriate, more violent responses. "Over the next coming months, I think we'll hear a lot more stories of marches and actions that end up in arrests and repression," he says. "Small-town cops aren't trained for crowd control at scale. There's literally a breaking point."

The young organizers have a much more optimistic take.

"Older generations were more afraid to speak out," says Mora. "It's time for us to stand up. It doesn't matter if you're in Wyoming or Alabama, it's important to get out there, as a citizen of your community, and send a message. It doesn't matter where you're at. It's about what steps you're going to take."

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