

# Civil unrest in Ferguson from the eyes of older citizens

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In August, 2014, the nation's attention turned to Ferguson, Missouri, after a young African-American man, Michael Brown Jr., was shot by a white police officer. The civil unrest that followed lasted for weeks. The aftershocks still continue.

How did that unrest impact older people in the community?

A new study, by a leading gerontologist at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, shows that issues related to safety remain their highest concern.

"Safety was a very interesting topic because people talked about it in various ways," said Nancy Morrow-Howell, the Bettie Bofinger Brown Distinguished Professor of Social Policy and director of the Harvey A. Friedman Center for Aging.

"Feeling unsafe if stopped by police, feeling unsafe because the police may not intervene, feeling unsafe after dark on the streets in the aftermath of the protests, feeling unsafe in loud community meetings," added Morrow-Howell, lead author of the study, "Experiencing Civil Unrest: Elder Voices on Ferguson," published in the Journal of Gerontological Social Work.

While the study group ranged in age from 64 to 93 years old—with the average age being 75—Morrow-Howell expected those findings would resonate in a much younger Ferguson-area subset.

"I imagine that, in general, younger people felt the same way," she said. "Perhaps one difference is that the [older adults](#) felt more vulnerable during the protests. For example, some felt like they needed to leave the protests at nightfall because they could not run or protect themselves if needed."

The aim of this study was to learn how older adults experienced the social unrest. Ten focus groups were conducted with 73 participants. Eight themes were identified. Issues related to safety were most commonly discussed. Participants reported a breakdown in intergenerational communications and expressed a desire for more exchange.

"I was surprised to learn that these older adults, many who participated in the [civil rights movement](#), felt unappreciated by younger folks," Morrow-Howell said. Nearly 6 of 10 participants in the study were African-American.

"They felt like their knowledge and experience were not valued. They really wanted to somehow support the younger generation but didn't know how," she said.

**More information:** Nancy Morrow-Howell et al. Experiencing Civil Unrest: Elder Voices on Ferguson, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2017.1310777](https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2017.1310777)

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