

GUN VIOLENCE IN MISSOURI

What is driving gun violence in KC? The community answer: Lack of trust in police

TAMMY LJUNGBLAD

BY HUMERA LODHI AND JELANI GIBSON

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In a year when Kansas City has set an all-time record for homicides, many Black residents say the problem is they can't trust the police.



Only have a minute? Listen instead

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Barbara J.K. Johnson was still in her Easter clothes when she ran out to her yard where a 14-year-old neighborhood boy lay on the ground, bleeding from a gunshot wound. He was dead by the time police arrived.

Such things happen too often on South Benton Avenue in Kansas City, where Johnson, a 75-year-old retired professor and teacher, lives. A few years earlier, another young man was shot in front of the house next to hers. Before that, it was an 8-year-old girl a few streets away.

Johnson tried to get help from police. She asked them to install a camera on her street, but they never did. And when she called one evening to report suspicious activity, officers responded by storming her backyard and pointing a gun at her window, she said.

When Johnson stepped outside to ask what was happening, an officer yelled at her: "Get your ass back in the house!"

For Johnson, it was one insult too many after years of harassment and abuse: police pulling her over for what she suspects was driving while Black, officers beating her son up after a car accident, law enforcement arresting her 10-year-old grandson for throwing a football at an amusement park.

She vowed never to call the police again.

"I'm tired of them bammng my door and treating me like I'm the criminal. They've made us enemies by the way they behave towards us," Johnson said. "I

don't trust them, and I'm not going to because I know they don't do right by us. If they've done things to me and my babies, come on — what's happened to your child would happen to the next kid as well.”

Similar feelings were echoed this year in neighborhoods across the city, where residents facing record levels of gun violence said law enforcement was there to police them — not to protect them. The [experience in Kansas City](#) matches a pattern seen across the United States, experts say, in which a lack of trust in police drives gun violence.

Police officials [have long noted that connection](#), saying shootings and homicides go unsolved because of a lack of witnesses. But many residents say police create an environment of fear in Black neighborhoods that erodes public safety.

To understand why, The Star interviewed more than 75 residents, activists, faith leaders and survivors for its first report as part of the [Missouri Gun Violence Project](#), undertaken in partnership with the nonprofits [Report for America](#) and [Missouri Foundation for Health](#). The statewide project will investigate the causes, consequences and possible solutions to gun violence.



Barbara J.K. Johnson, 75, a retired professor and teacher, lives in a tidy house on South Benton Avenue, where she surrounds herself with photos of her family, including her children and grandchildren. Tammy Ljungblad tjungblad@kcstar.com

This year, Missouri's three biggest cities — [Kansas City](#), [St. Louis](#) and [Springfield](#) — are on track to experience their worst years of gun violence ever. And the suffering is not felt equally by all residents.

Missouri has [led the nation](#) in the rate at which Black people are killed in shootings for most of the past decade. In Kansas City, 75% of homicide victims are Black, even though less than 30% of residents are.

NUMBER OF KC HOMICIDES BY RACE

Hover over the bars to see the numbers.

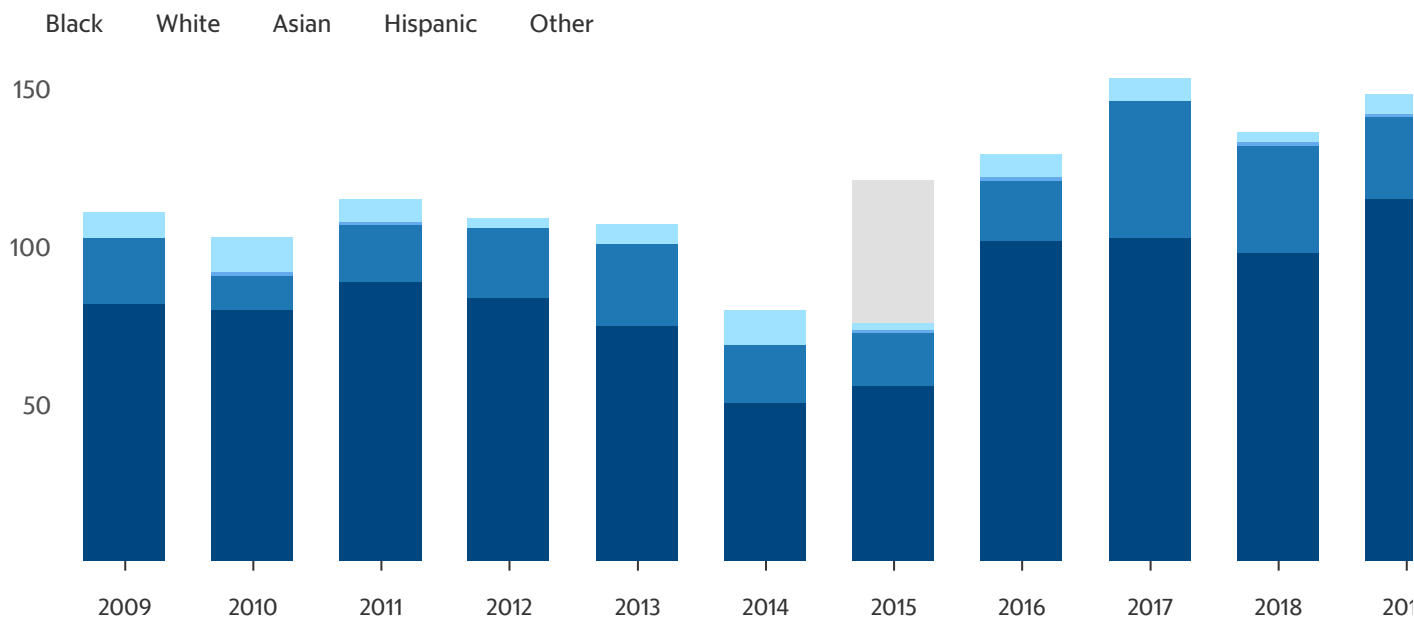


Chart: Humera Lodhi and Neil Nakahodo | Report for America, The Kansas City Star • Source: Kansas City Police Department • [Get the data](#)

Research [published earlier this year](#) by the Giffords Law Center, a nonprofit concerned with gun policy and safety, explored how disparate treatment by police increases gun violence in Black communities.

“Inequalities are all interconnected, and unfortunately gun violence is both one of the leading markers of inequality and one of the most deadly markers,” said Ari Freilich, state policy director for the Giffords Center.

The Star’s interviews with residents around the city showed that overall, the less people saw gun violence in their neighborhoods, the more they trusted police. And the more often people had to call the police the less they trusted them.

Both Black and white Kansas Citians reported that they knew they had different experiences.

Many Black residents complained that officers do not live in their areas, look like members of their community, or know people in the neighborhoods personally. When residents did reach out to law enforcement, or police arrived in the wake of another homicide, many found their work unsatisfactory: they cited slow

response times, poorly conducted investigations, and lack of communication with families.

Patterns of official complaints show the [Kansas City Police Department](#) has alienated itself especially in places with the highest rates of gun violence.

An analysis by The Star of more than 3,000 documented complaints against KCPD officers over the past 10 years shows three of the city’s five patrol divisions — Metro, Central, and East — produced nearly 80% of police misconduct claims. Those are the same patrol divisions where most of the city’s predominantly Black neighborhoods are found, and where the majority of the city’s shootings are reported.

COMPLAINTS AGAINST POLICE CONDUCT

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	Percentage of complaints	Percentage within general population
Black	64%	29%
White	30%	55%
Hispanic	4%	10%
Other	2%	6%

Correction: An earlier version of this chart of police complaint data with percentages did not add up to 100. The percentages were corrected to reflect that some residents were counted as both Hispanic and white.

Chart: Humera Lodhi and Neil Nakahodo | Report for America, The Kansas City Star • Source: [Office of Community Complaints](#) • [Get the data](#)

Experts say many factors drive gun violence: availability of firearms, poverty, social isolation and others, but over-policing and abuse only make it worse.

Alissia Canady, [a candidate for lieutenant governor](#) of Missouri, previously served as a city council member representing [the 5th District](#), which has seen

high levels of gun violence. She said during her time as chair of the public safety committee the city's anti-violence initiatives too often focused on enforcement rather than prevention.

"Those were not long-term solutions because you didn't really address the root issue," she said.

"In order to address the issue of gun violence, we have to be committed to investing in the prevention and the intervention efforts and Kansas City Police Department, that's not their thing."

Told of The Star's findings, KCPD spokesman Capt. David Jackson acknowledged there is a problem of trust between law enforcement and Black communities. But he disagreed with the idea that it causes gun violence.

"Historically, or within the last 50 years, there's no question there has been a difficult relationship between the Black community and the police," Jackson said in a phone interview Friday.

"There is really no factor that causes you to go out and use violence," he said. "That is a choice that people make."

Jackson said it's not police institutions or policies that cause the mistrust and that if some Black residents feel unfairly treated, that is their perception.

Police go through implicit bias training every year, Jackson said. The department deploys community interaction officers, school resource officers, and supports the Police Athletic League in efforts to build trust with residents.

Overall, Jackson said he thought the police department had a "very strong" relationship with the community.

Jackson named some leaders in Black communities who would have a more favorable view of police, including Pat Clarke, president of the [Bellefontaine Block Club](#) and a certified conflict mediator.

“No,” Clarke said when reached by The Star and asked if he trusted the police department.

“That’s probably the biggest issue — trust. A lot of times, we try to police ourselves.”

NO NEW SOLUTIONS

Kansas City is the only major city in the country that does not control its own police department. The KCPD is instead controlled by the [Board of Police Commissioners](#), appointed by the governor. Reached by The Star for comment on the city’s gun violence problem, board member Don Wagner pointed to guns, drugs and lack of witness cooperation.

“Let’s be realistic,” Wagner said. “If we could act on and change those three things — plus recognize our officers who put their lives on the line 24/7 — then we would reduce Kansas City’s homicides to near-single digits.”

Police and city officials have said the same things for years. In 2015, Mayor Sly James blamed a surge in violence on too many guns in the “hands of the wrong people” and law enforcement complained about a lack of witnesses. In a blog post last year, Chief Rick Smith [asserted a link between marijuana and violence](#) even though experts have found no clear link.

Meanwhile, the problem is worse than ever. More than 660 people have been shot in the past 10 months, and with more than 155 killed this year, the city [has set an all-time record for homicides](#).

For Johnson, the comments from the police commissioner play on old themes that have contributed to systemic racism in the city for years.

“They count on people in the community not actually understanding the history and the structure behind what has been true,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong, we don’t want the guns and the drugs, period. But it’s a real unfairness in how things have been processed in our community.”



The South Benton Avenue neighborhood Barbara J.K. Johnson, 75, has called home for decades. “Police was always a part of, what I called controlling and patrolling Black folk,” said Johnson, who has been stopped several times for “driving while Black.” Johnson said her mistrust of the police goes back years. “I don’t trust them, and I’m not going to because I know they don’t do right by us,” Johnson said. Tammy Ljungblad tljungblad@kcstar.com

A VICIOUS CIRCLE

When Johnson moved to Kansas City in 1961, segregation was still the law of the land.

It was different, but not better, than what she left behind in Tennessee: sheriffs dragging friends behind trucks, lynching, regular harassment and abuse.

Decades later, as a grown mother in Kansas City, Johnson ran to the scene where police beat her son after he crashed a car into a lamp post on Wabash Avenue. Women from nearby houses rushed out to protect him from the officers.

“You would have thought he had done something horrible by the way they were beating him: hitting him with gunbutts, hitting his legs,” she said. “If it hadn’t

been for the neighborhood women coming out and surrounding him, there is no telling how far they would have gone. It didn't matter because your child, just for the color of his skin, could be beat up by the police.”

Almost all of the residents The Star interviewed in neighborhoods with gun violence had a negative experience with the police. Some recounted law enforcement searching them without warrants, throwing them in jail for minor infractions, and aggressively questioning, beating and Tasing them for no crime at all.

“Entire communities have gone through traumatic experiences with law enforcement,” said Freilich of the Giffords Law Center.

Researchers studying the connection between a lack of trust in police and increased gun violence describe a vicious circle: When communities experience over-enforcement of minor infractions and under-protection from violence, they lose trust in law enforcement.

This makes it more difficult for law enforcement to do its job as residents become less likely to report crimes and cooperate as witnesses. As a result, shootings go unsolved and law enforcement further fails to protect residents.

Without adequate protection by police, young men in particular seek security in groups and are more likely to seek retributive justice — further driving up gun violence.

Neighborhoods where police are seen as illegitimate and unresponsive have significantly higher homicide rates than others.

“Without that trust, informal justice spikes,” Freilich said. “It speaks to how they experienced the law enforcement system in their community for generations: a system that has proved itself very quick to harm people of color.”

Johnson now relies on her community to resolve conflict. She feels they are better than law enforcement at keeping the neighborhood safe. When her home was broken into by teenage boys who lived nearby, she refused to call the police.

Instead, she put bars on her living room windows, boarded up the basement window, and then walked down the road and spoke to the young men's mothers.

"I see them [police] slamming our boys, grabbing them by the back of their pants and shirt, and I cannot tolerate thinking I would cause them to kill a young Black guy because he's hungry or he thinks he can get a computer from me or something"



Barbara J.K. Johnson, 75, a retired teacher and professor, strolls along the sidewalk on South Benton Avenue where she lives and views a neighboring house with a yard filled with bags of trash and debris. Tammy Ljungblad tljungblad@kcstar.com

Dee Evans, president of the Beacon Hill - McFeders Community Council, sees residents in her area making the same choices.

When her neighbors hear gunshots on a nightly basis around 27th Street and The Paseo they rarely call law enforcement — they call her.

"A lot of our Black young men don't feel safe," Evans said.

“I am an African American female, I have an African American son, I have Black grandchildren, I have Black great-grandsons. I have to sit down with them and talk with them — ‘if you’re stopped by a police officer, here’s some of the things that you can do as an individual to keep things from escalating.’”

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

This report kicks off a two-year, statewide journalism project investigating the causes, consequences and solutions to gun violence in Missouri. The first story examines how a lack of trust in police contributes to gun violence in Kansas City. The Star has launched the project in partnership with the nonprofits Report for America and Missouri Foundation for Health, which are helping to fund three reporters devoted to the effort.

TWO DIFFERENT REALITIES

At just 15 years old, Daisy Rodriguez has already learned she cannot trust the police to help her.

Daisy lives on Independence Avenue, in a neighborhood with a high rate of gun violence. She used to call the police if she or her family saw dangerous activity, but they would take hours to respond.

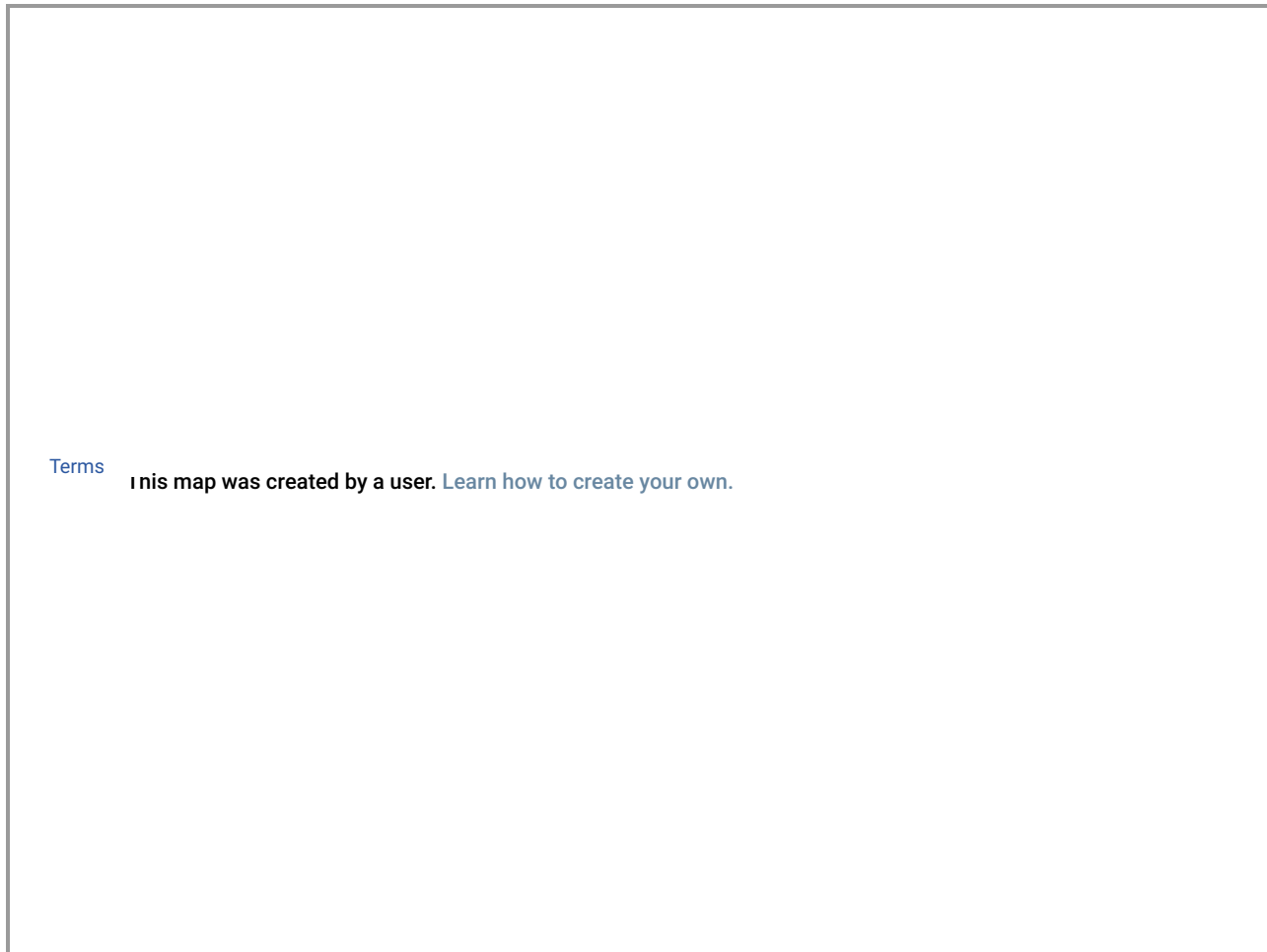
“They usually take too long to get here,” she said. “And when they get here, there’s nothing to say honestly, because the incident already happened.”

Now, she said, “if something happens, we ignore it.”

In neighborhoods with little gun violence, white residents especially tell a very different story. Almost everyone living in these areas reported police arrive promptly when called. They noted KCPD officers regularly came to homeowner association meetings and several mentioned police they knew personally who lived in their neighborhoods.

In the Bridlespur neighborhood, near State Line Road, Jon Goodwin, 65, says community gun violence and crime are not usually a concern. Kansas City police, he said, are quick to address even minor disturbances.

“It’s been quite good. They’ve been very responsive,” he said. The police are a friendly face in the area and a few officers even live in Goodwin’s neighborhood.



Kansas City Police Chief Rick Smith even attended a dinner hosted by [Country Club District Homeowners Association](#), a historically wealthy — and white — residential community in Kansas City.

“I’ve always felt safe and protected,” said Randy Irey, 73, former president of the association.

Residents of color rarely have the opportunity to interact with officers from their communities. Non-white residents make up 40% of the city’s population but less than 20% of the KCPD workforce.

Police prefer it this way, [according to Brad Lemon](#), president of the Kansas City Fraternal Order of Police. The union leader said in a March 10 board meeting that KCPD officers rent trailers to skirt residency requirements because they do not want to live in the city.

In order to be effective at combating crime, police and prosecutors must first address the way they have isolated communities of color, said Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker.

“We have to listen to communities that have been overpoliced, yet underrepresented and have been targeted for certain enforcement strategies whereas the white communities have not, and we have to right those old wrongs,” Baker said.

“You are losing trust with a community that we really need, a community that really matters, and a community that has experienced a lot of harm.”

In the neighborhood around The Refuge KC church on Independence Avenue, police only show up when there is a problem, and only seem to care when they are looking for a suspect, said pastor D’eric Fields, 25.

Two years ago, Fields was giving his weekly Sunday sermon when a young man began shooting [in the church](#), which was located on Hillcrest Road at the time.

The shooter was the son of two of the congregants, and was in an argument with another parishioner.

No one was killed, and police arrived in a timely manner to arrest the man responsible.

But in the following days and weeks, Fields was left feeling isolated and upset when no one from the department reached out to him to provide updates on the investigation. When the man was released, police failed to inform the church.

“It was very distasteful for me, that nobody had spoken to me, nobody called, nobody sent a letter to the church or got in touch with us about the results of it so

that we could continue to protect ourselves and continue to be aware,” Fields said.

The man was eventually killed in another shooting.

As a community leader, Fields must navigate a difficult path between managing police hostility and addressing conflicts in the community.

“If I have to call them I will,” Fields said of the police. “But I’ll just be honest, because of the lack of trust, a lot of times not just me, but I believe a lot of people in the community, would rather find the best way, the most peaceful way to handle situations without having to call.”

‘FIGHTING FOR MY LIFE’

Rhonda Herring says she knows who killed her son, but the police won’t do anything about it.

[Brandon Herring](#), 21, was just weeks away from becoming a father when he was killed and found in a creek bed more than three years ago.

In the years since, Herring said she has been harassed by her son’s killers and cornered by their relatives at a grocery store.

“They were over here trying to intimidate and put fear in me. They know I will tell everything I know, so they are scared,” Herring said. “One night, 2 a.m. in the morning, I heard this shooting, I got up, went to my desk, and there were three males in the open field shooting.”

Herring reached out to police for help, she said, but they didn’t do anything.



Rhonda Herring's son, Brandon Herring, was killed in Kansas City in 2017, and his body was found in a river. Herring says she knows who killed her son and has experienced threatening behavior by them, including men shooting near her home. She is very dissatisfied with the way police have handled the situation. Jill Toyoshiba jtoyoshiba@kcstar.com

Black residents interviewed by The Star said this is common: seeking justice through the KCPD seems like an uphill battle. Homicide investigations often ended quickly, while the case remained unsolved for years.

As of August, Kansas City police **showed a homicide clearance rate** of 43% for 2020 — the same as the average end-of-year clearance from the past five years.

The Rev. Vernon Howard, president of the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Kansas City**, said community leaders have driven through shooting scenes in the urban core and found bullet casings or other evidence left behind on the streets after investigations were concluded.

“The KCPD has been inadequate and inefficient,” Howard said. “How are we expected to trust them with the Black lives that are lost with homicide, murders

and violence?”

As unsolved cases pile up, victims are left with few choices: live in silence, speak to police and risk their life, or seek alternative routes of justice.

Canady, the former city council member, said it's not because people don't want justice.

“They just may not have the confidence in the police department,” she said. “I know victims that have been calling detectives to give them information and can't get a call back. People want swift justice, and police want easy investigations.”

Without reliable police protection, Rhonda Herring needed to find a way to protect herself. So she got licensed and legally bought a gun. She leaves it in plain view when she is in her driveway, and once pulled it out when her tormentors pulled up next to her on the road.

“I just pulled my gun out of my seat . . . I said, ‘So you want to do this here? You best go on your business and leave me alone. I'm trying to let the police deal with this but I will kill you’,” Herring said.

Of the men who Herring says were involved in her son's death, all but one have been arrested for other crimes. Still, her son's killing remains unsolved.

“I'm angry,” Herring said. “Every time I walk out my house, I leave with the state of mind that you have to watch yourself, that you have to protect yourself. It is not a joke. It is very hard to cope with. I can't enjoy my life because I'm out here fighting for my life.”

'HOW IS THIS ALLOWED?'

One night this summer outside a gas station on the corner of 35th Street and Prospect Avenue, Troy Robertson tried to help a young man he found carrying a gun.

The teen, who Robertson affectionately called “little brother,” had been grazed by a bullet a few days before and came home from the hospital with a scar on the back of his neck. He picked up the gun because he needed a way to protect himself and he did not feel he could turn to the police.

The young man had seen the way police hurt other people, including Robertson.

Robertson, a fixture at the intersection where he is well-known for his one-man anti-violence program “[Honk4Peace](#),” has been beaten up by police and arrested on flimsy charges several times over the past five years.



Anti-violence activist Troy Robertson is pictured in August 2020 holding a “Rest in Heaven” sign in memory of a gun violence victim at the intersection of 35th Street and Prospect Avenue in Kansas City. Robertson has reported being beaten and mistreated by police several times over the past five years. Jelani Gibson - The Kansas City Star

Some of the encounters have been caught on video, and some have been covered by local news outlets. He was arrested just weeks ago along with [Deja Stallings](#), a

pregnant woman whose treatment at the hands of police set off a new round of protests outside City Hall.

Even the proprietor of the nearby gas station, Zen Salehi, who at times has been frustrated with the large crowd Robertson attracts, acknowledged police were wrong last year when they held Robertson down and beat him until he had a seizure.

“He was on the ground shaking and I think he bit his tongue,” said Zen Salehi, the gas station owner.

“I felt sorry, I did not like what they did and the only bad thing, we did not have a camera but I saw what they did.”

Robertson has reported four incidents to the [Office of Community Complaints](#), one of the only avenues residents have to seek accountability from Kansas City police.

None of the complaints stuck.

COMPLAINT INVESTIGATIONS

The last ten years worth of data from the Office of Community Complaints, an oversight agency under the authority of the Board of Police Commissioners, show the majority of complaints made against police have not been investigated.

Not investigated

Victim failed to cooperate

36%

Closed prior to investigation, undisclosed reason

25%

Resolved without investigation

9%

Investigated

Non-sustained: Failed to prove alleged misconduct

16%

Exonerated: Incident occurred, officer cleared of wrong-doing

12%

Sustained: Act occurred without lawful police justification

3%

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Chart: Humera Lodhi and Neil Nakahodo | Report for America, The Kansas City Star • Source: Office of Community Complaints • [Get the data](#)

“I’m literally scared of the police,” Robertson said. “If I’m not doing anything wrong, how is this allowed?”

Many Black residents interviewed by The Star are aware that complaints about police beatings or abuse will go nowhere.

Less than a third of all complaints filed are ever investigated and a far smaller fraction — three percent — are sustained. Even if a complaint is sustained, the police chief decides any disciplinary action and can overturn the office’s ruling.

Several barriers stand in the way of a resident making a complaint.

Any complaint delivered in person must first be notarized. Complaints can also be made online, but the resident must have access to specific software.

After making the complaint, the resident must make a statement in a room alone with two police officers. An OCC official will record the interview but the resident cannot.

The OCC does not have authority to investigate shootings, and it does not operate independently as do similar agencies in other cities. The OCC is overseen by the Board of Police Commissioners.

Rex Archer, director of the [Kansas City Health Department](#), helped to develop KC Blueprint, the city's comprehensive plan to address violence. He is keenly aware of the way use of police force influences gun violence at large.

Police violence, like any other kind of violence, has a tendency to perpetuate itself. When people have been abused with violence they have a tendency to enact it on someone else when they get the chance.

"It's basically a learned behavior, and it is even partly hardwired into the way the brain works," Archer said.

"The way that [police] handle violence is with more violence, and treat people in violent ways and that's supposed to stop violence?"

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PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

At the end of September, Mayor Quinton Lucas, Jean Peters Baker, and Chief Rick Smith [unveiled Reform Project KC](#), a new anti-violence plan that emphasizes community outreach.

During the announcement at City Hall, they acknowledged the reasons for community mistrust of police, and the role it plays in gun violence.

It was the latest in a series of initiatives announced this year.

[Operation Legend](#), a short-lived Department of Justice effort, brought federal agents to Kansas City with the promise of helping solve murders. The majority of the resulting arrests, however, were for drugs and firearm possession, not homicides.

The police department said it is on track to outfit all patrol officers with body cameras [by early 2021](#).

Lucas suggested a city vote in November to make local control of police a legislative priority but then [pulled the proposal](#). His suggestion to create an independent police complaint office has yet to come to fruition.

But it is unclear how these efforts, which partially lean on enforcement strategies of the past, will reverse the disproportionate and damaging effects policing has on community safety in Black neighborhoods.

All the proposals and plans for reform mean nothing to Johnson. She has lived in Kansas City for decades, and felt little change in the way police officers treat her, her Black neighbors, family and friends.

“The sadness is I really have to see it to believe it. It was just some kind of dream they kept telling us about but you don’t train away hate, you don’t train away indifference, that requires living exposure, your whole heart has to become involved.”

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

More coverage is coming from all over the state this year as part of the Missouri Gun Violence Project. Along with additional reporting on issues of policing in Kansas City, the project will bring reports on domestic violence in Springfield, community gun violence in St. Louis and suicide in rural communities. Story tips or issues we should cover in 2021? Send email to gunviolence@kcstar.com.

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