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Wisconsin Reels After Police Shooting and Night of Protest

Jacob Blake, a Black resident of Kenosha, was shot in the back, setting off condemnations from Wisconsin's governor and Joe Biden, the Democrats' presidential nominee.



People gather Monday near the scene where Jacob Blake was shot by police officers in Kenosha, Wis. Credit... Carlos Ortiz for The New York Times

By Julie Bosman and Sarah Mervosh
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KENOSHA, Wis. — When Annie Hurst stepped outside her house on Sunday night, she saw something that made her scream.

Across the street, a police officer was aiming his gun at Jacob Blake, her neighbor, as he tried to get into his car with three of his children in the back seat. The officer grabbed him by his shirt and fired several times, shooting him in the back.

Within hours, graphic video of the shooting was racing across social media, and Kenosha erupted into protest, looting and fires downtown.

By late afternoon Monday, more than 100 members of the Wisconsin National Guard had been sent to Kenosha, demonstrators were gathering for another night of protest, and the Kenosha Police had ordered a curfew in the city, beginning at 8 p.m.

The scene of a white police officer shooting a Black man continues to occur with devastating frequency in the United States, even at the end of a summer marked by widespread protests and calls for reform after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

Kenosha, a city of 100,000 that a generation ago was a carmaking powerhouse, is the latest place where a police shooting left residents reeling. The shooting, which was captured in a brief but searing video by another neighbor, drew immediate condemnation from Gov. Tony Evers of Wisconsin, a Democrat, and set off protests and looting overnight throughout Kenosha's small downtown area on the shore of Lake Michigan.

The shooting instantly became a rallying cry for demonstrators in cities like Portland, Ore., Madison, Wis., and Chicago, and a topic in the presidential race, where Wisconsin is a crucial battleground state. On Monday, as Republicans were kicking off their national convention, Joseph R. Biden Jr., the Democratic nominee for president, spoke out against the police officer's actions. "The nation wakes up yet again with grief and outrage that yet another Black American is a victim of excessive force," he said.

Around Kenosha on Monday morning, dump trucks that had been set ablaze outside the county courthouse were still sending an acrid smell through the air. Stunned shop owners swept up glass that had been smashed overnight, and boarded up their storefronts with sheets of plywood.



The shells of cars burned on Sunday remained near the Kenosha County Court House on Monday. Credit... Carlos Ortiz for The New York Times

The police offered little detail about what had happened in the shooting, saying only that an officer had shot Mr. Blake while responding to a domestic incident. Local and

state officials declined on Monday to provide detailed information about the officers who responded.

Mr. Blake, 29, was in stable condition at a nearby hospital on Monday.

The investigation was immediately turned over by the Kenosha Police Department to the Wisconsin Department of Justice, and the three officers who were at the scene were placed on administrative leave.

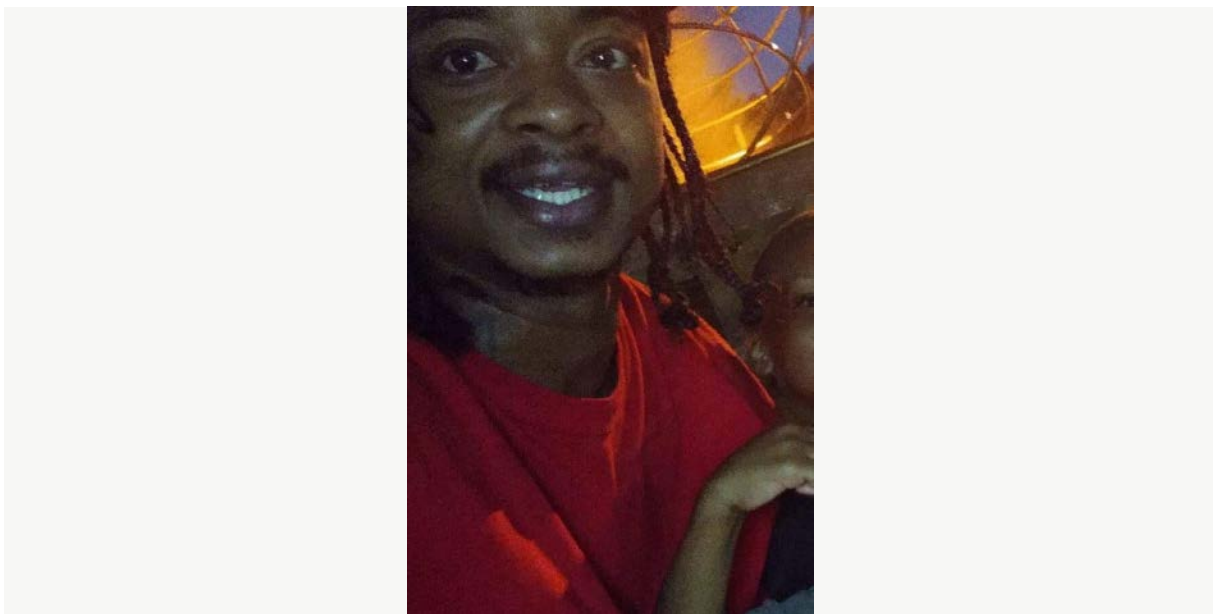
“What I saw in that video is disturbing,” said Anthony Kennedy, a Kenosha alderman who represents Mr. Blake’s district. “It is heartbreaking. And I don’t have an answer for what happened.”

While body cameras have become standard in many police departments around the country, they have been a matter of debate in Kenosha. Police officers in the city do not wear body cameras now, though the city plans to start using them in 2022, city officials said. Police cars are generally equipped with dashboard cameras.

Neighbors described an ordinary Sunday afternoon that suddenly and swiftly turned violent.

Shortly before the shooting, Mr. Blake, who worked as a security guard, stopped next door at the apartment of a friend, Donnell Lauderdale. Mr. Blake was carrying gifts for Mr. Lauderdale’s 8-year-old son.

“He had a bag full of presents,” Mr. Lauderdale said, standing outside his home. “He’s a family man. He takes good care of his kids.” Three of Mr. Blake’s six children — aged 8, 5 and 3 — are believed to have been in the back seat of the car when the shooting took place.



Jacob Blake was shot in the back by the police. Credit...via Ben Crump Law

Benjamin Crump, a lawyer for the family, said in an interview that he had been told that Mr. Blake was attempting to intervene in an argument between two women when the police arrived.

In a video taken from an apartment window across the street, several officers can be seen standing on a sidewalk next to a four-door S.U.V. The man identified as Mr. Blake, wearing a white tank top and black shorts, is seen walking along the passenger side of the vehicle, away from the officers, who are yelling. At least one of them points a gun at him.

Mr. Blake walks around the front of the vehicle and opens the driver's side door. Several people can be heard yelling, and one officer is seen grabbing Mr. Blake's shirt. As Mr. Blake opens the vehicle door, at least half a dozen shots are heard, while at least two officers can be seen with their guns pointed at him. The video, which is about 20 seconds long, ends shortly after the shooting.

"The police haven't told us why they did what they did to him," said Mr. Crump, a civil rights lawyer who has also represented the family of George Floyd. "Being a Black man in America, he was suspicious automatically."

In Kenosha, which is about 11 percent Black, 17 percent Hispanic and 67 percent white, many residents told of longstanding tensions between Black residents and the police. The mayor, the police chief and the district attorney are white.

Nick Neumann, 36, who is white, spent part of his day picking up trash in Civic Center Park, where much of the unrest on Sunday occurred.

He said he had a conversation a few days ago with an uncle, a police officer in Kenosha, who said that he has seen more tension than ever between residents and police officers, more anger and animosity on both sides.

"There's been a growing disconnect here for years," Mr. Neumann said. "There's always been an underlying distrust for the police."

Erik Adams, a neighbor of Mr. Blake's who is Black, said he was newly terrified of the police after seeing what had happened. He had fielded several phone calls on Sunday from friends who were worried that he might have been the one who was shot.

"I understand why people are angry," he said. "Black people want justice."

The Wisconsin attorney general, Josh Kaul, vowed to "vigorously and fully investigate the facts of this case," but said he was not ready to comment on the details, including information about the officers on the scene.

"Our pursuit of justice is going to be unwavering," he said Monday at an afternoon news conference.

Though Mr. Kaul, a Democrat, is leading an independent investigation, he said the decision to prosecute the case would be made by the local prosecutor. The Kenosha County district attorney, Michael D. Graveley, said his office would decide whether to press charges based on the evidence gathered by the outside investigators.

“We are going to try to do this as quickly as we can,” he said, but “these kinds of huge decisions, in a community that is hurting as badly as we are today, are not decisions that can be made in haste, and they are not decisions that can be made before we have the complete information.”

“We ask people to be as patient as they can,” he added. “We support all advocacy that is peaceful. I’ve had thousands of emails today from people who are quite appropriately expressing their strong feelings about this case.”



Mayor John Antaramian of Kenosha, right in blue jacket, speaks with demonstrators before walking into the press conference in Kenosha, Wis. Credit... Carlos Ortiz for The New York Times

Mayor John Antaramian of Kenosha spoke at the afternoon news conference, which was abruptly moved indoors because of safety concerns.

“People are mad,” he said. “People are upset. There are a lot of reasons for that — a lot of good reasons for that. But in the end, the only way this country and this community survives is if we learn to listen, and right now I’m afraid we are having trouble doing that.”

The shooting quickly set off a partisan showdown in a state where divided government — a Democratic governor and a Republican-held Legislature — has led to repeated clashes over policy.

Governor Evers announced that he was calling state legislators to a special session next week to consider measures on police accountability and transparency. The measures were first put forth by Mr. Evers’s administration in June after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but were not taken up by the Legislature.

“This movement has touched every corner of Wisconsin, and frankly, I should not need to call a special session when people across our state — from the streets of my small hometown of Plymouth to the streets of Milwaukee — are demanding their elected leaders take action,” Mr. Evers said.

But Republican leaders accused the governor of playing partisan politics by quickly calling for a special session, and the fate of that session seemed uncertain.

“The governor is choosing to turn to politics again by dictating liberal policies that will only deepen the divisions in our state,” said State Representative Robin Vos, the Republican speaker of the State Assembly. Mr. Vos on Monday called for a task force focused on racial disparities and police practices.

The governor’s proposal calls for measures including establishment of statewide standards for the use of force by law enforcement agencies, requirements for police departments to ban the use of chokeholds, and elimination of the use of “no knock” warrants, a type of warrant that allows officers to enter people’s homes without notice.