

# After Breonna Taylor's Death, Black Engagement in Kentucky Politics Soared

"Her door being kicked in was our door being kicked in," a former state representative said as the first anniversary of Ms. Taylor's death approached. "It really has transformed everything."



By [Will Wright](#)

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Exactly one year ago, a young woman died as a barrage of police gunfire ripped through the walls of her modest apartment in Louisville, Ky. For months, her death went largely unrecognized.

[Once more people took notice](#), though, the city was shaken to its core. Protests rocked the downtown area during the summer and fall as demonstrators demanded justice through tears and megaphones and erected a memorial in a prominent square. They prayed together and sang together, chanting, "Say her name!"

Breonna Taylor became a rallying cry, and when no officers were charged in connection with her death, which occurred during a botched drug raid, [protesters returned to the streets](#). Activists are optimistic that the first anniversary of her death, on Saturday, will further fuel a promising surge of civic engagement, particularly from Black residents.

"What happened to Breonna Taylor has shaped every aspect of our lives," said Charles Booker, a former state representative for Louisville. "Her door being kicked in was our door being kicked in. It really has transformed everything."

Perhaps most visible have been the demonstrations, including one on Saturday that drew hundreds of people to Jefferson Square downtown. But there have also been new protocols for Louisville officers, a police reform bill that is winding through the state legislature, and a more diverse group of people showing interest in politics.

"This isn't just marching," said Carmen Jones, a founder of the Black Women's Collective in Louisville. "We protest with policy, by putting Black folks in office, by pushing for policy change, by helping our community."

Jecorey Arthur, a 28-year-old Black man who won his election for Louisville Metro Council last year, said he believed that Ms. Taylor's legacy had been expansive.

"People are starting to look at some of those root causes and have a better understanding of what's coming up on your Metro Council agenda, what legislation is being filed, who is your Metro Council person," Mr. Arthur said. "Those were questions that people couldn't answer a year ago."

Ms. Taylor, 26, died in a chaotic scene. Officers broke down her door, firing 32 rounds after her boyfriend shot at them once, saying later that he had thought they were intruders. Three [officers were eventually fired](#), and a grand jury charged one of them, [Brett Hankison](#), with [wanton endangerment](#) for shooting into a neighboring apartment.

The F.B.I. is still investigating the case, and on Saturday, Robert Brown, the special agent in charge of the agency's Louisville office, said investigators are committed to reaching an "appropriate conclusion" and are "actively investigating all aspects" of Ms. Taylor's death.

"Even though the Covid pandemic presented several unexpected obstacles, F.B.I. Louisville has made significant progress in the investigation since it was initiated in May 2020," Mr. Brown said [in a statement](#).

On Friday, Ms. Taylor's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, filed a lawsuit in federal court against 12 current and former members of the Police Department and also the city and county government. The suit seeks "compensatory and punitive damages" and alleges that officers used excessive force and unlawfully obtained the search warrant for the apartment.

The anniversary rally Saturday was one of the city's largest social justice demonstrations since Chief Erika Shields took over the Police Department in January. The department and city leaders [shut down several blocks downtown](#), where demonstrators gathered before beginning a march.

Among them were the families of several other people of color who were shot by police officers around the country, including Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wis., Danny Ray Thomas in Houston and Sean Monterrosa in Vallejo, Calif.

"I pray none of you join this fraternity," Ben Crump, a lawyer representing Ms. Taylor's family, said of the other families gathered in Louisville. "We've got to deal with this police use of force because it's killing our people."

Activists and some Kentucky politicians have criticized the Police Department for what they considered heavy-handedness at previous rallies, including the liberal use of pepper balls and the arrests of peaceful protesters.

Linda Sarsour, a founder of Until Freedom, said she thought the decision to block off streets on Saturday could unsettle demonstrators during what should be a somber memorial.

"It just tells me that maybe not that much has changed," Ms. Sarsour said. "They claim it's for safety reasons, but for us, when we see a lot of law enforcement, visible law enforcement, it sets a tone that they shouldn't want to set."

The breakdown of trust has damaged the morale of officers and citizens alike. According to [a report](#) published in January on the Police Department's policies, 75 percent of officers surveyed said they would leave the job if they could. The report also noted a striking lack of diversity: 12.5 percent of Louisville police officers are Black, compared with 24 percent of the city's overall population.

City officials have made several changes to policing since Ms. Taylor's death, including the banning of no-knock warrants and the establishment of a civilian review board. But some activists are still calling for additional officers to face charges.

State Representative Attica Scott of Louisville said she would write a letter to the U.S. attorney general next week to ask for a full investigation into Ms. Taylor's death.

In Frankfort, the state capital, Ms. Scott has seen a dual response to the surge of Black activism.

The State Senate approved a bill on Thursday that would, among other things, make it a crime to insult police officers, which many people saw as a direct response to the racial justice movement. But before a recent State House committee hearing for a police reform bill known as ["Breonna's Law,"](#) thousands of people wrote in and called to voice their support.

That grass-roots enthusiasm, Ms. Scott believes, will be Ms. Taylor's lasting legacy.

"I have never seen Black people, in particular, be as involved with the legislative process," she said. "That, to me, is exactly what we want out of movements."

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