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Fort Worth Police Have More Violence to Answer For, Residents Say

Black residents of the city complained about mistreatment by the police long before Atatiana Jefferson's death. "I never was supposed to be arrested," said one woman. "I was the caller."

Dorshay Morris, called 911 to report that her boyfriend was drunk and threatening to kick in her door. She ended up spending four days in jail.

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Allison V. Smith for The New York Times

The New York Times

By Manny Fernandez, Sarah Mervosh and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs

• Oct. 20, 2019

Police Violence
against black youth in Texas

FORT WORTH — Before there was Atatiana Jefferson, there was Jackie Craig, a black woman who called the police to report that her white neighbor had grabbed her son — and found herself pinned to the ground by the officer who responded.

There was Henry Newson, a black man who had just been discharged from the hospital and was waiting for a ride home when two officers working security questioned why he was there. He refused to leave, and a white officer punched him in the face.

There was Craigory Adams, also black, who knocked on his neighbor's door late one night carrying a barbecue fork — to keep stray dogs away, he said — and the neighbor called the police. A white officer pointed a shotgun at Mr. Adams but said he wasn't meaning to fire it. He did, striking Mr. Adams in the arm.

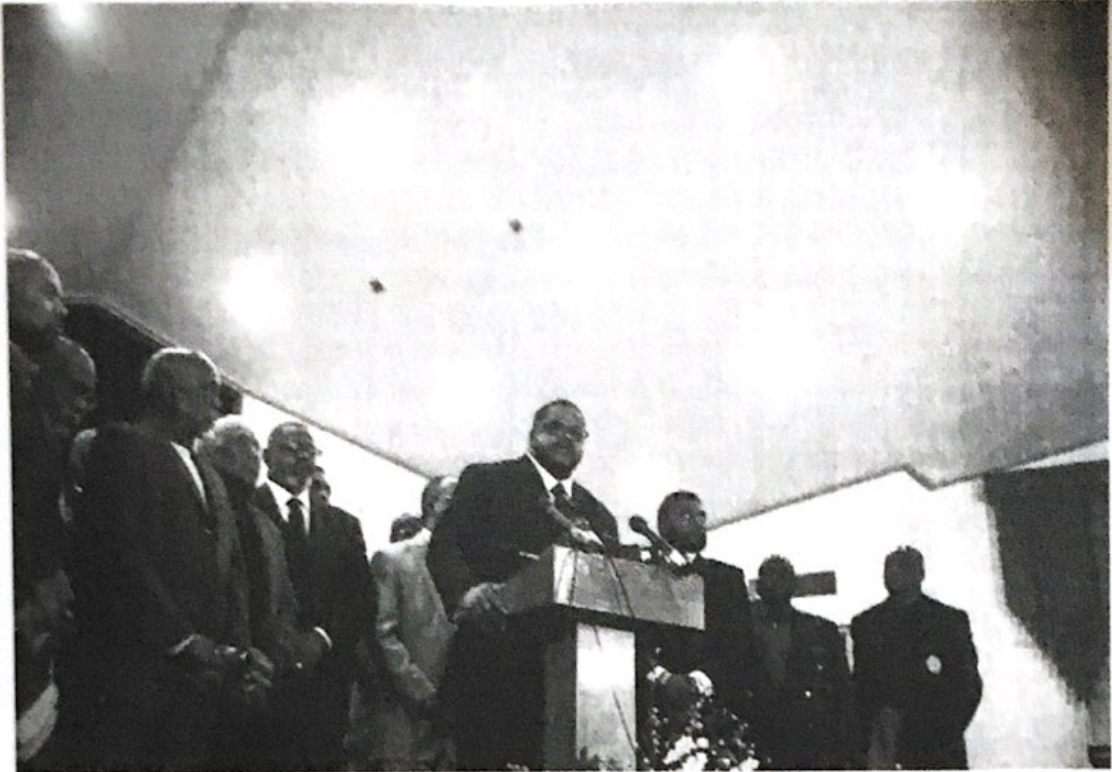
These names and others have all been brought up again in the days since Ms. Jefferson, a 28-year-old black woman, was shot and killed in her bedroom this month by a white police officer who was standing outside her window. In the largely black and Hispanic neighborhood in southeast Fort Worth where Ms. Jefferson lived, and in others nearby, many residents recalled times when they had tried calling the police — and ended up sorry that they did.

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"This is not an isolated incident," said the Rev. Kyev Tatum, who is part of a coalition asking the Justice Department to investigate "over-aggressive policing" in Fort Worth's communities of color. "This is historic and it is systemic, and we understand that racism is at the heart of this."

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Rev. Kye Tatum of the New Mount Rose Missionary Baptist Church has asked the Justice Department to investigate what he called "over-aggressive policing" in Fort Worth's communities of color.

Credit:

Hans Paruch-Lansman for The New York Times

The long-simmering tensions boiled to the surface this month after Ms. Jefferson became the sixth person to be killed by the Fort Worth police since June. Four of the six were black.

Five years after a police shooting in Ferguson, Mo., stoked a national debate over race and policing, Fort Worth is far from the only community where residents complain that the conversation in their city never really went anywhere.

In Dallas, just 30 miles east of Fort Worth, a similar case played out tragically over the past year: A white off-duty police officer was sentenced to 10 years in prison earlier this month after she mistakenly entered the apartment of a black neighbor, Botham Shem Jean, and shot him to death while he was watching television.

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"There's a pattern," said Ms. Craig, 49. "They want to say that it's not racially motivated," she said. "It's just obvious to the eye that it is."

Ms. Jefferson's death drew hundreds to a vigil outside her house in Fort Worth. At City Hall, protesters held signs reading "Say Her Name." And on the Democratic presidential debate stage last week in Ohio, Julián Castro brought up Ms. Jefferson's death to discuss police violence.

The mayor and police officials have described Ms. Jefferson's death as inexcusable, and city leaders said they planned to bring in an outside team of experts to review the Fort Worth Police Department.

"This incident has eroded the trust that we have built with our community and we must now work even harder to ensure that trust is restored," Ed Kraus, the interim police chief, said after the incident.

Fort Worth has a storied history as a Western outpost — it lives up to its Cowtown nickname with twice-daily cattle drives in the historic district — but today, the nation's 13th largest city is in some ways two different places, divided along racial and economic

lines. It is home to the Walmart heiress Alice Walton, the wealthiest person in Texas, but neighborhoods like Ms. Jefferson's are dotted with abandoned homes.

Most of the police force, about 65 percent, is white -- as are the mayor, the city manager, a majority of the City Council and now the police chief, after the department's first black chief was fired earlier this year. Black and Hispanic residents, who together make up a majority in the city, complain that they often feel ignored by city leadership, and unfairly targeted by the police. Black residents on their own make up about 18 percent of the population, but they accounted for 40 percent of arrests in 2017.

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Fort Worth has a storied history as a Western outpost, but today the city is divided along racial and economic lines.

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Dana Panch-Linsman for The New York Times

The latest turmoil began after midnight on Oct. 12, when Ms. Jefferson was playing video games with her 8-year-old nephew. Two officers responded to a neighbor's report that her doors were open. As Ms. Jefferson grabbed a gun from her purse, one of the officers fired the fatal shot through a bedroom window without identifying himself, the police said. The officer, Aaron Y. Dean, who quickly resigned, now faces a murder charge.

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From the beginning, city officials knew the case was going to be unlike any of the previous police shootings. The mayor, Betsy Price, said that Chief Kraus called her at about 6:30 a.m., and told her the essence of what had occurred overnight.

"He just said, 'I don't think it's going to be pretty,'" Mayor Price recalled. "It's too early. I don't have the details yet, but it looks like the wheels fell off."

Public resentment had been building for years. In interviews, many residents said they knew people who had been shot, shocked by stun guns or wrestled by the police. At least four highly publicized encounters have been documented in video footage and lawsuits. Some of those officers have faced criminal charges and left the department; others remain on the force.



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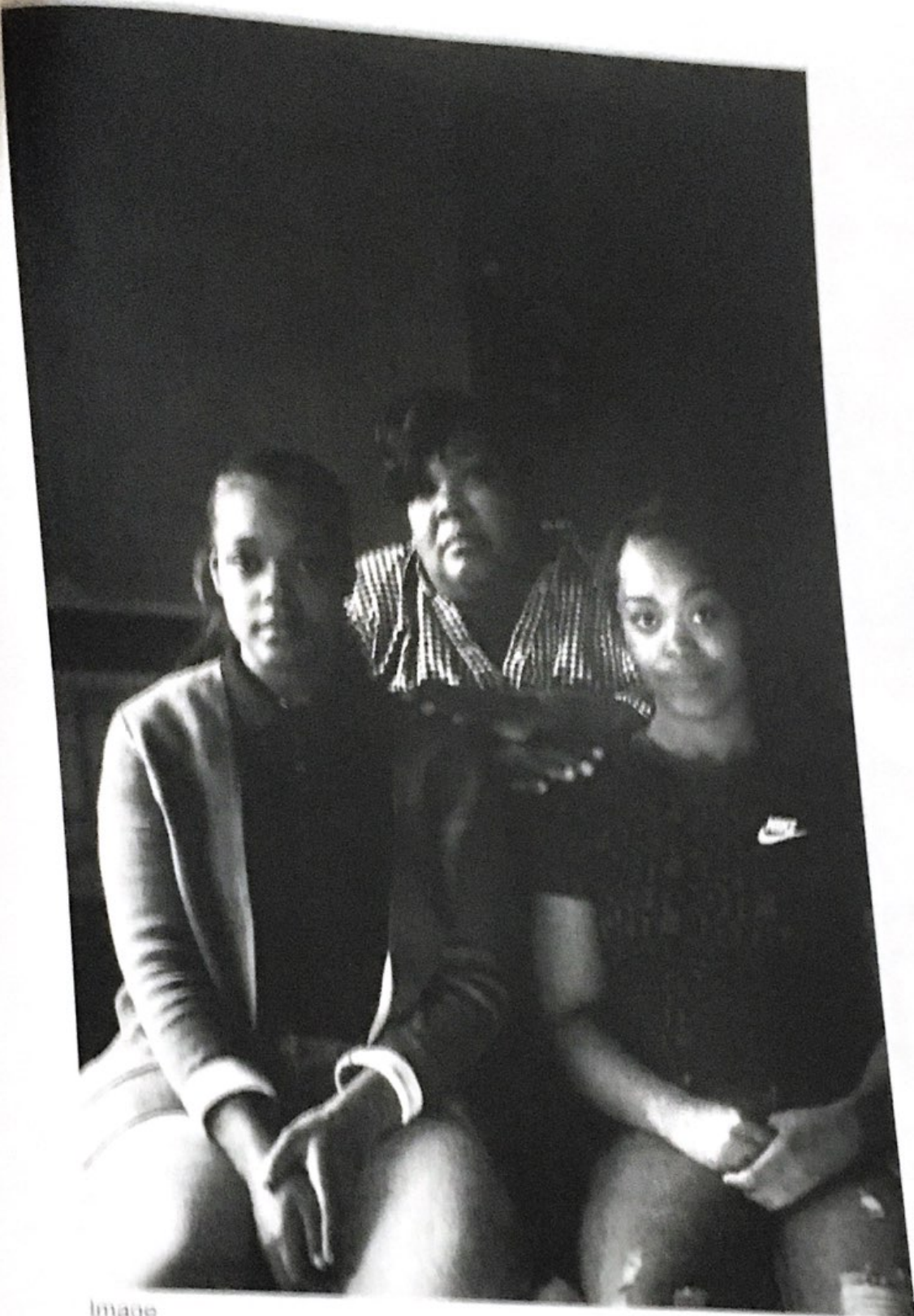
As Ms. Craig grew agitated, he added, "I'm just asking."

Officer Martin told her that if she did not stop yelling at him, "you're going to piss me off, and I'm going to take you to jail."

Moments later, the officer pushed aside one of her daughters, Jacques Hymond, who was 15 at the time, pulled out his Taser and pointed it at Ms. Craig as he forced her to the pavement. He later handcuffed and arrested Ms. Craig, along with Jacques and Ms. Craig's other daughter, Brea Hymond, who was 19 at the time.

Ms. Craig said she had hoped her arrest would serve as a warning of the need to make changes in the Police Department. A task force appointed by the City Council examined issues of race and culture in the police force, but major reforms never happened. The officer was suspended for 10 days but remains with the department.

"I believe it will continue, because I'm not seeing any consequences behind the actions that these police officers are taking," Ms. Craig said. "If there's no punishment behind it, why not keep doing it?"



Image

“There’s a pattern,” said Jackie Craig, 49, who had called the police over a neighbor’s threat to her son and was arrested herself, along with her teenage daughters, in 2016.

Credit

Allison V. Smith for The New York Times

Another incident occurred in August 2017, when Dorshay Morris called 911 to report that her boyfriend was drunk and threatening to kick in her door. She had a knife in her purse to protect herself.

The two officers who arrived made her feel like a criminal, she said. When she refused to give them her ID, the officers grabbed her by the hair, and Sgt. Kenneth Pierce, who is white, ordered a rookie officer to shoot her with a Taser. She was taken into custody and charged with resisting arrest and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. She said she spent four days in jail. The charges were later dropped. Sergeant Pierce was fired, but was reinstated after he appealed.

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“I never was supposed to be arrested,” Ms. Morris said in an interview this week. “I was the caller.”

Six Fatal Police Shootings

So far this year, Fort Worth police officers have fired shots at nine people, killing six and injuring two. The fatal shootings have all happened since June, and are more than the department had in the previous two years combined.

Policing experts caution against extrapolating from one year of data — the numbers can fluctuate from year to year — but six fatal shootings is more than most police departments in similarly sized cities have recorded. For example, in Indianapolis, police have fired at three people this year, killing one. And in San Francisco, police have not fired a gun at anyone this year, a spokeswoman said.

In one of the fatal cases in Fort Worth, an officer shot a white Army veteran who had barricaded himself with a rifle in his father’s home. The police said they thought he had pointed the rifle toward them when he was shot, but in fact, it was a flashlight.

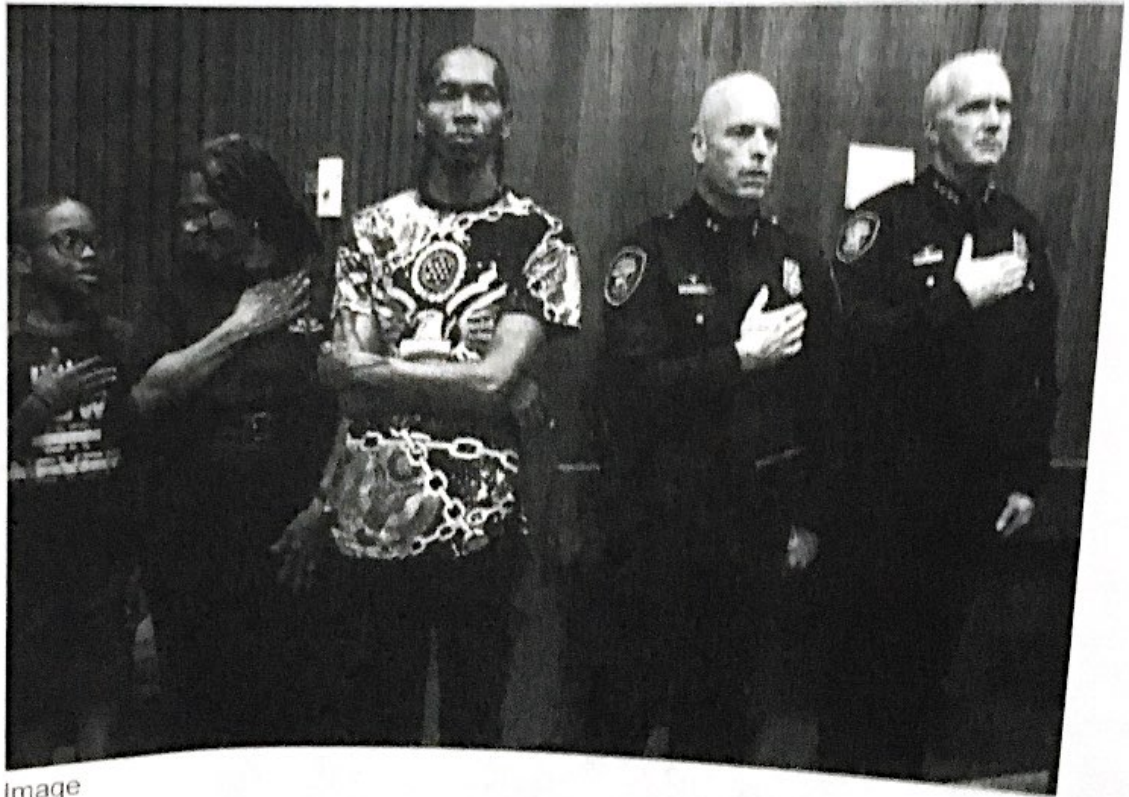
In another scrutinized case, an 18-year-old black man who was a person of interest in a homicide was killed while holding a gun and running from the police, according to video footage. Activists noted that he was shot in the back.

In each of the fatal shootings this year, the victims were armed. In several, they had barricaded themselves inside a home or vehicle in a standoff with the police. Still, four of the six victims, including Ms. Jefferson, were black, and community members have questioned whether the police could have done more to de-escalate or avoid risk.

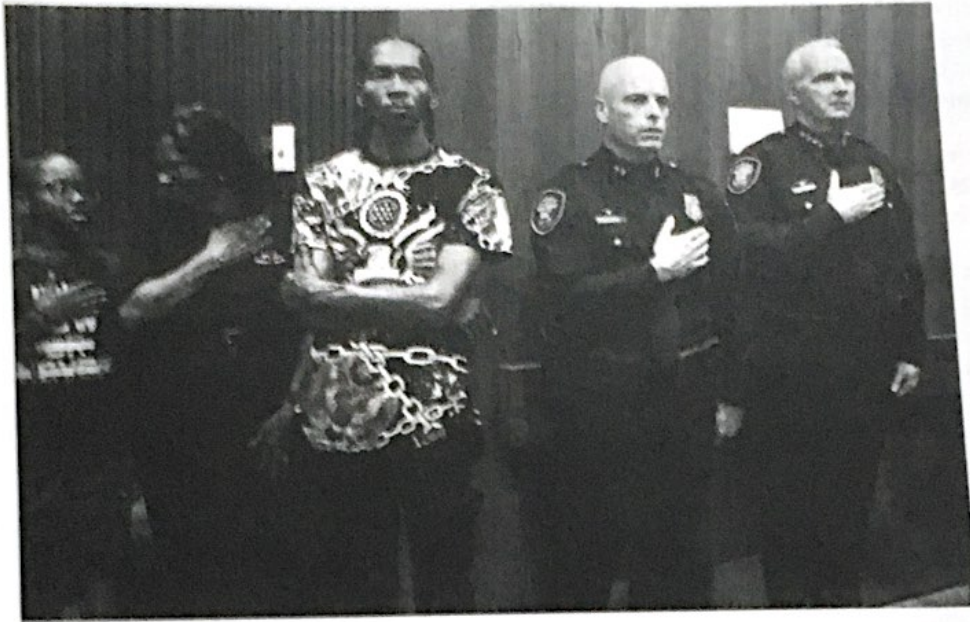
"Just because they had firearms doesn't warrant a death sentence on the street," said Pamela Young, an organizer who is pushing for community oversight of the Police Department.

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Chief Ed Kraus of the Fort Worth Police Department, far right, during the Pledge of Allegiance at the City Council's first meeting after Ms. Jefferson's fatal shooting.

Credit:

Han, Fanieh Linsman for The New York Times

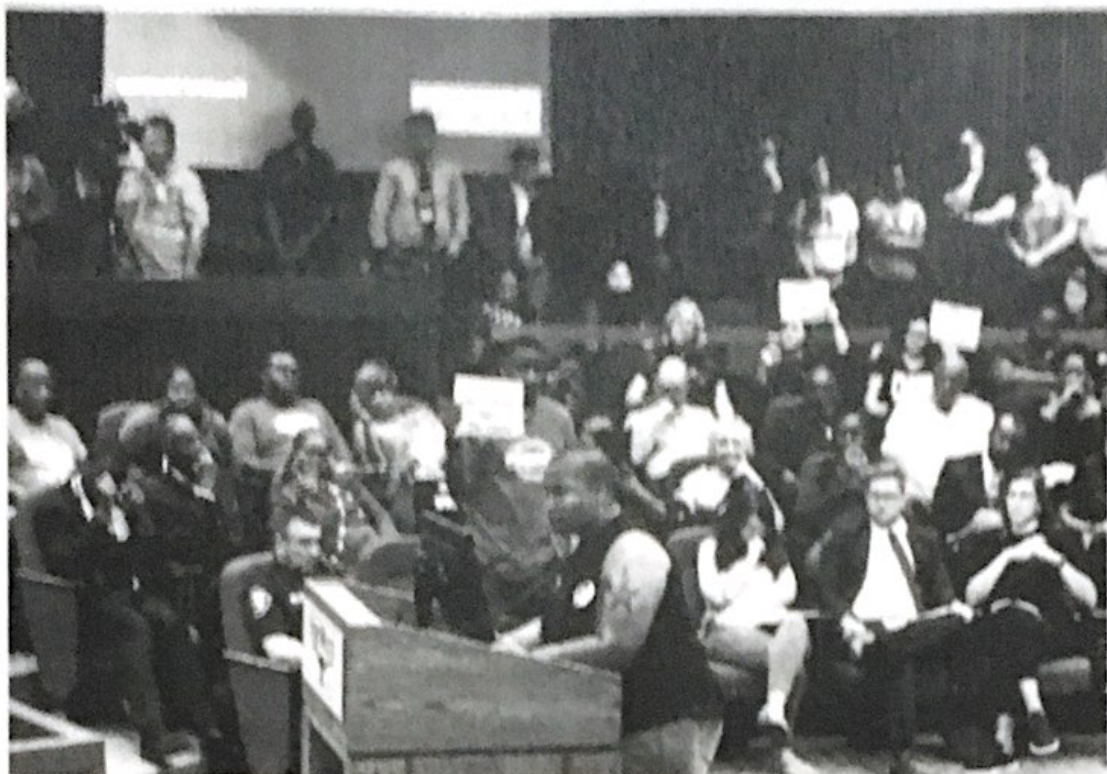
The mayor and police officials have apologized for the killing of Ms. Jefferson. City leaders said they were working on changes to improve diversity and accountability.

"Please, do not let the actions of one officer reflect on the other 1,700," Chief Kraus, who has been on the job since May, said during an emotional news conference. "There's absolutely no excuse for this incident, and the person responsible will be held accountable."

In an interview, Mayor Price said she had heard from some black residents who said they feared the police so much that they would no longer call them for help. She was deeply worried by that sentiment. But she flatly rejected the idea that the city's white leadership was not engaged with black residents.

"I am in the minority community more than anywhere else," the mayor said.

The tensions gripping the city were on full display on Oct. 15 when residents poured into City Hall for the City Council's first meeting after the shooting — so many that a large, frustrated crowd was forced to wait for hours outside.



Image



Jen Sarduy spoke to the City Council during the tense meeting.

Credit...

Ilana Panich-Linsman for The New York Times

Many residents demanded to know not only what the city was going to do for the family of Ms. Jefferson — who many call “Tay” — but for everyone else.

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“You mentioned that we need to provide Tay’s nephew with anything he needs,” Jen Sarduy, a black Fort Worth resident, told the council. “He needs his aunt alive. He needs to not have witnessed her murder. He needs the city to be equitable and just and safe.”

Manny Fernandez reported from Fort Worth, and Sarah Mervosh and Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs from New York. Ilana Panich-Linsman and Marina Trahan Martinez contributed reporting from Fort Worth. Kitty Bennett and Susan Beachy contributed research from New York.