

Black Lives Matter Has Grown More Powerful, and More Divided

Since the murder of George Floyd, the racial justice movement has received millions of dollars in donations. But some chapters have questioned how those funds are spent.



Seventeen chapters have broken away from the national Black Lives Matter organization, claiming that its leaders had failed to provide financial transparency or include the chapters in decision-making.

By John Eligon

June 4, 2021

In the year since George Floyd was murdered, racial justice organizations across the country have been inundated with millions of dollars in donations and thousands of eager new activists. They have earned a prominent platform that puts them on the front lines of political and social battles.

Their influence has been immediate: A local organization helped St. Louis elect a Black woman as mayor for the first time. A longtime activist group in Louisville, Ky., oversaw what became a hub for protests over the police killing of Breonna Taylor. And in Chicago, activists have lobbied the city to fund a program that would dispatch paramedics, instead of police officers, to people experiencing mental health crises.

But the surge in attention has also brought greater scrutiny and exposed tensions and challenges within a movement that saw tremendous growth over the past year, much

like other progressive groups such as the Women's March, which saw three of its leaders step down amid controversy.

In a very public dispute, several chapters within the national organization known as the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation broke away, claiming that the group's national leaders had failed to provide financial transparency or include the chapters in decision-making. And family members of some victims of police killings have openly criticized racial justice organizations, accusing them of raising money in their children's names but not supporting the families and their work to make change. "I just feel like all these organizations that were made were made after someone had lost their loved one," said Michael Brown Sr., who established his own foundation after his son, Michael, was fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014. "And they see that these parents are coming up with organizations already. They should be able to get on board and support these families that's going through this."



Michael Brown Sr. said the foundation he established after his son's death in Ferguson, Mo., sometimes struggled to get resources.

Since the police killing of Mr. Brown's son led to a new wave of civil rights activism seven years ago, organizers of protests and marches have openly embraced a grass-roots philosophy. They have avoided individual leaders, seeking instead to build a movement by the people, for the people.

But the tensions playing out complicate the road ahead for the organizations that have sprouted from this movement, as their sway has only grown since Mr. Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. In the weeks after his killing in May 2020, an estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in about 4,700 demonstrations across America, accounting for the largest movement in the country's history.

That growth has brought great visibility, but also difficult questions over how to sustain it and how to effect meaningful change, whether through donations to political campaigns, services to families or investments in Black communities — or all of the above.

Chapters that broke from the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, calling themselves the #BLM10, issued an open letter in December that said internal attempts at seeking transparency had gone nowhere.

Among their primary concerns, they said, was that the national organization had not detailed how much it had raised in donations or how the money had been spent. The national group also had not given much financial support to the chapters for the work they were doing in their communities, they said. If Black Lives Matter could not be transparent with its own members, the chapters argued, then it could not be a credible advocate for the communities it aimed to serve.

Leaders of the global network defended the way it was spending money, and emphasized that the breakaway chapters criticizing the group were not officially affiliated with it. The infusion of funds over the past year will allow the global network to build out its infrastructure so it can become a sustainable operation, said Melina Abdullah, a co-founder of the Los Angeles chapter which is affiliated with the global network.

“I think we have to be very, very clear again that we are a power-building organization that works in concert with families,” she said, “but not a social service organization for families.”

As some leaders have risen to international attention, they have faced backlash from activists who see that ascent as a betrayal of the movement’s grass-roots spirit. And activists who once accused legacy civil rights leaders and organizations of being too mainstream and detached from the masses are now facing those same criticisms.

From W.E.B. Du Bois’s criticism that Booker T. Washington was too accommodating to white people, to ministers objecting to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s approach to protest as too worldly, tensions have long been a part of social justice movements.

“With visibility comes vulnerability, which is why you have to be tight in what you do,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton, an often polarizing figure who has parlayed a long career in activism into becoming a political and media figure and the creator of a civil rights group, National Action Network, with chapters throughout the nation.

Younger activists who criticized him several years ago for not being grass-roots enough have recently turned to him for advice as they wrestle with the type of scrutiny he has faced, he said.

“I think out of the tension, it will make us all settle and find more possible ways to work together,” he said. “I think that sometimes it’s uncomfortable, but it’ll bring us to a better place, I hope.”

For years, national leaders warned that the Black Lives Matter movement could fracture if internal concerns were voiced publicly, said YahNé Ndgo, who recently stepped back as a core organizer with one of the breakaway chapters, Black Lives Matter Philly. That prevented many chapters from speaking up, she said.

But when the national leaders spun off a new organization, BLM Grassroots, last year to act as an umbrella for all chapters, those with concerns had to speak up, Ms. Ndgo said. It felt like another attempt by the national organization to evade accountability, she said.

“If a group is not acting in service to the movement,” she said, “then it has to be addressed.”

Amid questions from critics, the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, which received tax-exempt status as a nonprofit organization last year, in February released its most complete accounting in its roughly six-year history. It reported receiving \$90 million in donations last year, the most it had ever raised in a year. A majority of the funds were saved, the report said, with \$8.4 million spent on operational expenses and \$21.7 million distributed to local aid organizations and chapters.

The report caught the attention of Mr. Brown, who has at times seen the foundation he established after his son’s killing struggle to get resources, he said. In a video posted to social media, he stood alongside a local activist, who demanded that Black Lives Matter contribute \$20 million to local organizers.

After releasing the video, Mr. Brown met with Patrisse Cullors, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter, and other leaders from the organization. “We’re working on developing tangible relationships to aid in the work that we do within our foundation and the community,” Mr. Brown said in an interview. Last week, Ms. Cullors resigned from her post, saying that she planned to focus on other projects and that her departure was unrelated to criticism she has faced.



Patrisse Cullors, a Black Lives Matter co-founder, and others in the organization have received scrutiny over how they allocate funds.

While BLM Grassroots will center on the work by local organizers in its various chapters, the national arm will focus on fund-raising, grant making and serving as an “action-oriented think tank of the movement,” according to the report on its operations.

The organization has increasingly sought to be a force in politics and last year created a political action committee to support candidates in November’s elections. It also lobbied against the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court and drafted public safety legislation called the Breathe Act that it plans to champion before Congress.

But some activists say the optics are troubling. The families of some victims struggle financially, while the leaders of racial justice organizations oversee large fund-raising hauls that come, in part, from the public’s sympathy for the deaths of their loved ones.

Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black boy who was killed by Cleveland police officers in 2014, blasted Tamika Mallory, a co-founder of an organization called Until Freedom, calling her a “clout chaser” after she appeared at the Grammys in March.

Similar criticism has been widespread, with some local activists chastising national leaders for appearing more interested in publicity and fund-raising over the gritty work of pushing for change on the ground.

“We’re not trying to do celebrity activism,” said the Rev. T. Sheri Dickerson, the executive director of Black Lives Matter-Oklahoma City. “We’re trying to save lives, uphold lives and to empower Black lives.”



Protesters marched during a Black Lives Matter rally in Lafayette, La., last year.

Still, even with internal tensions, racial justice organizations say the past year has put them in a strong position.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation has grown and gained influence among elected officials. Leaders say they now have 20 chapters, some of which engage in local battles to reduce police department budgets and institute policy changes.

There are now 17 breakaway chapters loosely collaborating to support the work they do in their respective communities, such as bailing out protesters who get arrested and providing resources and assistance to the families of those killed by the police.

Several families of people killed or injured by the police are turning toward one another for support instead of formal activist groups. Saying she was tired of what she saw as activists trying to make money off the victims of police violence, Lisa Simpson, whose son, Richard Risher, was fatally shot by the Los Angeles police in 2016, said she was starting her own movement with other victims’ families.

As much as some racial justice organizations argue they are working to change the system to prevent future police killings, that work can sometimes be of little comfort to people like Ms. Simpson who have lost their children.

“Because when the money’s gone, I got days where I cry, where I’m sad, where I’m angry, where I’m upset,” Ms. Simpson said.

Ultimately, the public tussle over the Black Lives Matter movement may serve to strengthen it, said Daniel Gillion, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania who studies protest movements. The conflict allows a broad cross-section of people to have a say in shaping the movement, which bolsters the democratic principles upon which it was founded, he said.

“This isn’t Nancy Pelosi talking with congressional members behind closed doors,” he said. “It’s not that. It is truly grass roots, involving multiple people chiming in. And that’s what you want.”

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