**Newark Riots 1967**

**Events**

The Newark Riot of 1967 began with the arrest of a cab driver named John Smith, who allegedly drove around a double-parked police car at the corner of 7th St. and 15th Avenue. He was subsequently stopped, interrogated, arrested and transported to the 4th precinct headquarters, during which time he was severely beaten by the arresting officers. As news of the arrest spread, a crowd began to assemble in front of the precinct house, located directly across from a high-rise public housing project. When the police allowed a small group of civil rights leaders to visit the prisoner, they demanded that Mr. Smith be taken to a hospital. Emerging from the building, these civil rights leaders begged the crowd to stay calm, but they were shouted down. Rumor spread that John Smith had died in police custody, despite the fact he had been taken out the back entrance and transported to a local hospital. Soon a volley of bricks and bottles was launched at the precinct house and police stormed out to confront the assembly. As the crowd dispersed they began to break into stores on the nearby commercial thoroughfares. Eventually violence spread from the predominantly black neighborhoods of Newark's Central Ward to Downtown Newark, and the New Jersey State Police were mobilized. Within 48 hours, National Guard troops entered the city. With the arrival of these troops the level of violence intensified. At the conclusion of six days of rioting 23 people lay dead, 725 people were injured and close to 1500 people had been arrested.

**Causes of the Newark Riot**

A variety of factors contributed to the Newark Riot, including police brutality, political exclusion of blacks from city government, urban renewal, inadequate housing, unemployment, poverty, and rapid change in the racial composition of neighborhoods.

**Police-Community Relations**

For residents of Newark’s predominantly black Central Ward, the police were a persistent, if not entirely welcome presence. Patrolmen, who were mostly of Irish and Italian descent routinely stopped and questioned black youths with or without provocation. During the decade preceding the riot, several high profile cases of police brutality against young black men were reported, some resulting in death. In July 1965, Lester Long, aged 22, was shot and killed by police after a “routine” traffic stop. A few weeks later, Bernard Rich, a 26-year old African-American male, died in police custody under mysterious circumstances while locked in his jail cell. On Christmas eve that year, Walter Mathis, aged 17, was fatally wounded by an “accidental” weapons discharge while being searched for illegal contraband. Despite calls for the appointment of a civilian police review board and hiring of more African American policemen, such proposals went unheeded. Police-related shootings and beatings for the most part were not prosecuted; Few cases of police abuse in Newark ever made it to a jury.

**Political Exclusion**

The mutual suspicion and hostility that characterized the relationship between black citizens and the police in Newark were matched by feelings of political powerlessness and acrimony toward political officials. Black residents of Newark were not only underrepresented on the police force, but were also sorely absent from the corridors of political power. This disparity of political power was self-evident in Newark, when Mayor Hugh Addonizio, who had professed sensitivity to black concerns during his election campaign, failed to appoint blacks to leadership positions in his administration. Most tellingly was the manner with which the mayor handled a school board vacancy by appointing an Irish high school graduate, Councilman James T. Callaghan over Wilbur Parker, the first African-American certified public accountant in the State of New Jersey.
Further contention resulted over the administration of federal anti-poverty funds. As part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, the federal government sought to channel funds to community groups in poor neighborhoods as a means of empowering poor people to address local social problems. Utilizing these funds, the black community began to organize politically. When federal anti-poverty funds were cut back, militant leaders like Amiri Baraka, then known as Leroi Jones began to speak of revolution.

**Urban Renewal**

In Newark, “urban renewal” or “Negro removal” as it was referred to by local residents, would play an important role in fomenting rebellion. Plans were already in place to build superhighways which would bisect the black community. Then in the early months of 1967 the city proposed the “clearance” of 150 acres of “slum” land to build a medical school/hospital complex. Of course, this would involve the demolition of numerous homes in the predominantly black Central Ward. Given the shortage of housing in other areas, the effects of such displacement were potentially devastating. Activist Tom Hayden succinctly summarized the resident’s fears:
“The city’s vast programs for urban renewal, highways, downtown development, and most recently, a 150 acre Medical School in the heart of the ghetto seemed almost deliberately designed to squeeze out this rapidly growing Negro community that represents a majority of the population” (Hayden 1968:6) Upon hearing of the proposal, members of the local community quickly mobilized and began to hold protest rallies. Some of the same people who attended these rallies were present at the 4th precinct house, when the riot started that summer. The city’s plan to build the medical school, while demolishing black occupied homes, helped set the stage for future confrontation.

**Unemployment and Poverty**

Amidst a backdrop of police brutality and housing crisis, a profound change was underway in the economic structure of cities like Newark and Detroit. By the late 1960s both cities were caught in the throes of industrial decline, for which black workers bore the brunt. The flight of manufacturing jobs, which had begun in the 1950s, accelerated during the 1960s. In Newark, the famed breweries that drew water from the polluted Passaic River shut down, as did the tanneries which fouled the water to begin with. The big conglomerates, Westinghouse and General Electric, who manufactured large appliances in Newark soon followed. In their wake, thousands of jobs were lost.
As a result of previous discrimination and poor education, black workers, who were concentrated in heavy industry, felt the impact of these changes more than white workers who had moved upward into managerial and professional jobs. But it was black youth, just entering the labor market, who seemed to have suffered the most in the long run. The Hughes Commission (1968) stated the following grim statistics. Among 16-19 year old Negro men, more than a third—37.8% were jobless. “Aggravating the growing deficit of resources even further was the postwar abandonment by industry, leaving fewer employment opportunities nearby for the lower skilled and unskilled who remained in or came into the city. Stripped of much of its leadership and other resources and faced with problems from before and after the war, the city came to be like a house ransacked” (Wright p57)

 **Housing**

The quality and availability of housing was a major source of contention among black residents and government officials. A public opinion survey by the Governor’s Select Commission on Civil Disorder in New Jersey, otherwise known as the Hughes Commission, revealed that 54% of black respondents indicated that “housing problems had a ‘great deal to do with the riot’” Much of the existing housing in Newark during the mid-to late 1960s was uninhabitable by modern safety and health standards. The city’s own application for the Model Cities program in 1966 “described over 40,000 of the city’s 136,000 housing units as substandard or dilapidated”. (Report for Action 1968:55) Slumlords collected rent but often failed to perform regular maintenance, let alone improvements, to their properties. (Sternlieb 1969). Sometimes landlords simply set fire to their property in hope of receiving an insurance windfall. Between 1961 and 1967 Newark averaged 3620 structural fires per year. (Winters 1979:5). Due to their limited housing options, blacks in Newark paid more money for lesser quality domiciles. Public housing in Newark merely helped concentrate poverty and despair in one centralized location, further isolating the black poor from the society at large.

**Demographic Change**

In Newark, as a result of post-war suburban migration, the white population plummeted to approximately 158,000 in 1967 from 363,000 in 1950 and 266,000 in 1960. Correspondingly, the black population of Newark rose from 70,000 in 1950 to 125,000 in 1960 and an estimated 220,000 in 1967. By 1967, a majority of Newark residents (55%) were African-American. Demographic changes at the city level, were reflected in particular neighborhoods, namely the Central Ward, formerly home to a sizable concentration of immigrant and second generation Jews. Abandoning their homes and synagogues, these Jews, along with some Poles and Italians, fled for the suburbs of nearby South Orange, West Orange, and Livingston. By the time of the riot, the Central Ward was a predominantly black neighborhood, yet served by mostly Jewish owned businesses--- a recipe for ethnic tension. With respect to Newark in the 1960s Dr. Nathan Wright Jr. stated, “All societies strive more for order than for orderly but needed changes. Thus it would seem immediately fallacious to deny that gross discrimination did not exist in a city that has moved from an 85 percent white urban oriented majority in 1940 to a nearly 60 percent black, strongly rural oriented black majority in 1965. Newark has been—and is—the scene of massive urban change. Such change brings disorganization” (Wright p8) Riot fatalities in Newark were concentrated in neighborhoods that had experiences the most rapid rate of black in-migration and white outmigration during the previous decade.