**Detroit Riots 1967**

**Events**

The Detroit Riot of 1967 began when police vice squad officers executed a raid on an after hours drinking club or “blind pig” in a predominantly black neighborhoods located at Twelfth Street and Clairmount Avenue. They were expecting to round up a few patrons, but instead found 82 people inside holding a party for two returning Vietnam veterans. Yet, the officers attempted to arrest everyone who was on the scene. While the police awaited a “clean-up crew” to transport the arrestees, a crowd gathered around the establishment in protest. After the last police car left, a small group of men who were “confused and upset because they were kicked out of the only place they had to go” lifted up the bars of an adjacent clothing store and broke the windows. From this point of origin, further reports of vandalism diffused. Looting and fires spread through the Northwest side of Detroit, then crossed over to the East Side. Within 48 hours, the National Guard was mobilized, to be followed by the 82nd airborne on the riot’s fourth day. As police and military troops sought to regain control of the city, violence escalated. At the conclusion of 5 days of rioting, 43 people lay dead, 1189 injured and over 7000 people had been arrested.

**Causes of the Detroit Riot**

The origins of urban unrest in Detroit were rooted in a multitude of political, economic, and social factors including police abuse, lack of affordable housing, urban renewal projects, economic inequality, black militancy, and rapid demographic change.

**Police Brutality**

In Detroit, during the 1960s the “Big Four” or “Tac Squad”roamed the streets, searching for bars to raid and prostitutes to arrest. These elite 4 man units frequently stopped youths who were driving or walking through the 12th street neighborhood. They verbally degraded these youths, calling them “boy” and “nigger”, asking them who they were and where they were going. (Fine 1989:98). Most of the time, black residents were asked to produce identification, and having suffered their requisite share of humiliation, were allowed to proceed on their way. But if one could not produce “proper” identification, this could lead to arrest or worse. In a few notable cases, police stops led to the injury or death of those who were detained. Such excessive use of force was manifested in the 1962 police shooting of a black prostitute named Shirley Scott who, like Lester Long of Newark, was shot in the back while fleeing from the back of a patrol car. Other high profile cases of police brutality in Detroit included the severe beating of another prostitute, Barbara Jackson, in 1964, and the beating of Howard King, a black teenager, for “allegedly disturbing the peace”. (Fine 1989:117) But the main issue in the minds of Detroit’s black residents was police harassment and police brutality, which they identified in a Detroit Free Press Survey as the number one problem they faced in the period leading up to the riot. (Detroit Free Press 1968, Fine 1989, Thomas 1967). According to a Detroit Free Press Survey, residents reported police brutality as the number as the number one problem they faced in the period leading up to the riot. (Detroit Free Press 1968, Fine 1989, Thomas 1967).

**Housing**

Affordable housing, or the lack thereof, was a fundamental concern for black Detroiters. When polled by the Detroit Free Press regarding the problems that contributed most to the rioting in the previous year, respondents listed “poor housing” as one of the most important issues, second only to police brutality. (Detroit Free Press 1968, Thomas 1997:130-131). Detroit had a long history of housing discrimination stretching back to the turn of the century when black migrants first arrived in the city and middle-class African Americans sought to integrate predominantly white neighborhoods. During the 1940s and 1950s white Detroiters sought to block the entry of blacks into their neighborhoods by legal and extra-legal means, in one instance building a six-foot high, one-foot wide concrete wall along Eight Mile Road, to separate themselves from potential black neighbors. In a similar vein, white residents engaged in several bitter campaigns during the 1940s and 1950s to prevent the integration of public housing located in predominantly white areas (Farley et al. 2000:154-161) By the 1960s, despite with the movement of some blacks into formerly white neighborhoods, fact segregation had become more pronounced. The quality and cost of housing differed substantially for blacks and whites in Detroit, with black residents paying considerably higher rents than their white counterparts for equivalent accommodations. Only 39 percent of African Americans owned their own homes in 1960, as compared with the 64 percent of whites who were homeowners.

**Urban Renewal**

In Detroit, the shortage of housing available to black residents was further exacerbated by “urban renewal” projects. In Detroit, entire neighborhoods were bulldozed to make way for freeways that linked city and suburbs. Neighborhoods that met their fate in such manner were predominantly black in their composition. To build Interstate 75, Paradise Valley or “Black Bottom”, the neighborhood that black migrants and white ethnics had struggled over during the 1940s, was buried beneath several layers of concrete. As the oldest established black enclave in Detroit, “Black Bottom” was not merely a point on the map, but the heart of Detroit’s black community, commercially and culturally. The loss for many black residents of Detroit was devastating, and the anger burned for years thereafter.

**Economic Inequality/Relative Deprivation**

As an internationally recognized as a center of the automobile production, Detroit seemed to fare a little better economically than other American industrial cities in the immediate post-war era. But beginning in the 1950s, the big car manufacturers, Ford, Chrysler and GM began to automate their assembly lines and outsource parts production to subcontractors located in other municipalities and foreign countries. (Sugrue 1996:128) Detroit, like other cities, was deindustrializing and black workers, who had less seniority and lower job grades than white workers “felt the brunt” of this change. Young black men were particularly hard hit by the combination of deindustrialization with historical job discrimination in the automobile industry. According to historian Thomas Sugrue, young workers, especially those who had no post-secondary education, found that entry-level operative jobs that had been open to their fathers or older siblings in the 1940s and early 1950s were gone. “By the end of the 1950s, more and more black job seekers, reported by the Urban League, were demoralized, ‘developing patterns of boredom and hopelessness with the present state of affairs’ The anger and despair that prevailed among the young, at a time of national promise and prosperity, would explode on Detroit’s streets in the 1960s. (Sugrue 1996:147) Yet black Detroiters had higher incomes, lower unemployment rates and higher levels of education relative to their peers in other cities. Nonetheless these measures paled in comparison with the gaps in income, employment, and education in Detroit among whites and blacks. According to one long-time community activist, blacks in Detroit did not compare themselves to blacks in other cities. Rather, they compared themselves to whites in Detroit. Relative deprivation helped give rise to black militancy in Detroit.

**Black Militancy**

Despite the election of a liberal Democratic mayor who appointed African Americans to prominent positions in his administration, and despite Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh’s good working relationship with mainstream civil rights groups, a significant segment of the black community in Detroit felt disenfranchised, frustrated by what they perceived to be the relatively slow pace of racial change and persistent racial inequality. Local militant leaders like the Reverend Albert Cleague spoke of self-determination and separatism for black people, arguing that whites were incapable and or unwilling to share power. The civil rights movement was deemed a failure by these young leaders in the black community. At a black power rally in Detroit in early July 1967, H. Rap Brown foreshadowed the course of future events, stating that if “Motown” didn’t come around, “we are going to burn you down”.

**Demographic Change**

Like Newark, Detroit was swept by a wave of white flight. During the 1950s the white population of Detroit declined by 23%. Correspondingly, the percentage of non-whites rose from 16.1% to 29.1%. In sheer numbers the black population of Detroit increased from 303,000 to 487,000 during that decade. (Fine 1989:4) By 1967, the black population of Detroit stood at an estimated 40% of the total population. (National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders 1968:89-90). As in Newark, some neighborhoods were more affected by white flight than others. This was particularly true for the Twelfth Street neighborhood, where rioting broke out in the summer of 1967. “Whereas virtually no blacks lived there in 1940 (the area was 98.7% white), the area was over one-third (37.2%) non-white in 1950. By 1960, the proportion of blacks to whites had nearly reversed: only 3.8 percent of the areas residents were white. Given that the first blacks did not move to the area until 1947 and 1948, the area underwent a complete racial transition in little more than a decade.” Sugrue 1996:244)

This rapid turnover in population in the neighborhood brought with it the attendant ills of social disorganization, crime and further discrimination. It’s impact in the 12th street area was devastating. According to Sidney Fine, “The transition from white to black on Detroit’s near northwest side occurred at a remarkably rapid rate…In a familiar pattern of neighborhood succession, as blacks moved in after World War II, the Jews moved out. The first black migrants to the area were middle class persons seeking to escape the confines of Paradise Valley. They enjoyed about “five good years” in their new homes until underworld and seedier elements from Hastings Street and Paradise Valley, the poor and indigent from the inner city, and winos and derelicts from skid row flowed into the area. Some of the commercial establishments on Twelfth Street gave way to pool halls, liquor stores, sleazy bars, pawn shops, and second hand businesses. Already suffering from a housing shortage and lack of open space, Twelfth Street became more “densely packed” as apartments were subdivided and six to eight families began to live where two had resided before. The 21,376 persons per square mile in the area in 1960 were almost double the city’s average” (Fine 1989:4) This neighborhood would serve as the epicenter of the 1967 riot.