

To what extent was the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry to Detroit's suburbs the main cause of the 1967 Detroit Riots?

In the early 1900s, Detroit transformed into an industrial powerhouse. Combined with the Great Migration, automobile factories opened by the “Big Three” – Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors – led to a citywide population boom. Between 1910 and 1950, Detroit’s population rose 1.4 million, and Detroit’s economy skyrocketed. However, following WWII, a series of developments precipitated perhaps the largest single-city decline in the last century, marked by the Detroit Riots of 1967 – an upheaval many view to have been led by African Americans.

Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will seek to answer the question: To what extent was the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry to Detroit's suburbs the main cause of the 1967 Detroit Riots? Albrecht's *Detroit: Still the 'Other' America* provides crucial information on the broader context of the riots' causes within racist social hierarchies dating back to the 1920s. Sidney Fine's *Violence in the Model City*, contrarily, offers a localized analysis of Detroit in the years before and after the riots, supported by rioter testimonies and their perspectives on what inspired the riots – details unavailable in Albrecht's journal. Together, these two sources offer this investigation insight into the socioeconomic forces behind the riots.

Fine, Sidney. *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967*. Michigan State University Press, 2007. Accessed 21 January 2020.

The source’s origin is that it was written in 2007 by Sidney Fine. Fine was a history professor at the University of Michigan and a consultant for both the Ford Corporation and the UAW. The origin’s value is that Fine's experience with Detroit's automobile companies and

unions provides this investigation insight into its main topic – the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry. The origin's limitation is that because the source is a book, Fine likely sensationalized some content for commercial appeal.

The source's purpose is to uncover why the riots occurred despite serious social reforms directed by Detroit's mayor. The purpose's value is that uncovering factors behind the riots leads Fine to consider perspectives that oppose racial influences commonly recognized as the riot's causes – contrast important for this investigation to evaluate each cause's significance. The purpose's limitation is that Fine may have been pressured to present new interpretations about the riots' causes, even when faced with insufficient source material.

The source's content includes analysis and statistics exploring why Detroit's Cavanagh administration failed to ameliorate Detroit's racial and class tensions. The content's value is that the statistics – compiled from interviews with rioters – factually reveal why many decided to riot. However, these statistics are also a limitation on the investigation because they present a false promise, reflecting the opinions of a limited sample of rioters whose perspectives may not have been representative of the whole.

Albrecht, Gloria. "Detroit: Still the "Other" America." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29, no. 1 (2009): 3-23. Accessed March 1, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23562991.

The source's origin is that it was written by Gloria Albrecht and published to the Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics in 2009. The origin's value is that Albrecht, a New Left historian, understands the overlooked perspectives of Detroit's black populace on the riots – perspectives offering this investigation a glimpse into racial tensions that fueled the riots. Though, a limitation is that the source's publication in a Christian ethics journal interferes with

the source's objectivity concerning the causes of the riots: the journal's stated focus on cultural injustices in the United States may have constrained Albrecht's argument.

The source's purpose is to remind Christian ethicists how unjust power arrangements in 1900's Detroit led to the city's collapse, culminating in the Detroit Riots. The purpose's value is that to revisit Detroit's deterioration, the source necessarily summarizes the influences behind the riots. The purpose's limitation is that reminiscing on Detroit's disadvantaged populace, Albrecht intentionally disregards the perspectives of Detroit's wealthy white leaders – perspectives valuable for this investigation to understand city policies that impacted the riots.

The source's content describes how the economic marginalization of African Americans in Detroit factored into the riots and Detroit's modern atrophy. The content's value is that its emphasis on how de facto segregation in Detroit caused the riots provides a counterclaim to this investigation's analysis of the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry as the riots' primary cause. The content's limitation is that descriptions of contemporary Detroit, which are irrelevant to the investigation, detract from Albrecht's discussion of the riots.

Section B: Investigation

Though many factors influenced the Detroit Riots of 1967, the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry to its suburbs was the main cause of the riots to the extent that it fueled an economic dissatisfaction within Detroit's population, leading to the riots. In the 1950s and 60s, Detroit's Big Three automobile companies began moving manufacturing from Detroit to its suburbs, laying off tens of thousands of mostly male workers in the process (Fine 3). Done to increase manufacturing efficiency, decentralization increased poverty in Detroit as blue-collar jobs – which many Detroiters relied on – began dissipating. Remaining jobs were often

unattainable as well, with most employers only hiring for white-collar positions, such as those in insurance (Mooney 310). As a result, furloughed workers faced stiff competition from the middle and upper-class, as well as women, for jobs left in Detroit. For these unemployed, living in what was reputed to be the “model city,” this difficult life was infuriating (Fine 17; Albrecht 10). Indeed, a federal survey of 500 rioters found many blamed their lack of job opportunities for the riots (The Detroit Riot 3). The same survey also found the typical riot arrestee was an automobile worker and had been unemployed at least five weeks in the preceding year (The Detroit Riot 3). Though the government, omitting any reference by rioters to national issues, exaggerates the effects of local economics, the rioters’ perspectives nevertheless suggest that Detroit’s economic instability – which the automobile industry’s decentralization contributed majorly to – was significant in their decisions to riot.

Consequently, some revisionist historians contend that de facto segregation in Detroit's suburbs also played a substantial role in causing the riots by exacerbating the economic effects of decentralization. In the two decades before the riots, as the automobile industry left Detroit for its suburbs, over 500,000 whites left to follow it (Albrecht 10). Albrecht contends that when African Americans attempted to do the same, however, so-called white neighborhood improvement associations thwarted their efforts (Albrecht 10; Mohl 18). These racial color lines, she argues, forced many African Americans to remain unemployed and hemmed into Detroit’s poverty ridden neighborhoods, creating a dissatisfaction that – since the majority of rioters were black – likely caused the riots (Albrecht 10). Yet, demographer William Frey contends that deliberate suburban segregation was uncommon in the 1960s and 70s, citing national surveys that found most whites endorsed residential integration at that time (Frey 427). Though the broad populations of these surveys were likely unrepresentative of Detroit’s, the surveys suggest de

facto segregation may have been less prevalent in Detroit's suburbs – and less impactful on the riots – than Albrecht claims. Moreover, although African Americans led the riots, the argument behind de facto segregation fails to explain why thousands of white workers participated: residential segregation would not have hindered their ability to follow the automobile industry out of Detroit and escape Detroit's decline (Jay 40). As a result, it is unlikely that de facto segregation played a major role in causing the riots since it affected a fraction of rioters.

On the other hand, Detroit's deteriorating housing conditions were a considerable factor in causing the riots to the extent that they amplified the material effects of Detroit's increasing poverty. Under the Eisenhower administration, national and state infrastructural reform targeted poor neighborhoods for demolition (Mohl 13). In Detroit, these programs manifested in new interstates, including the 1964 "Chrysler Freeway", that cut through and destroyed centers of African American communities (Smith 94). This occurred even as northern cities experienced an influx of migrating African Americans, and thus Detroit soon found itself with too many people but not enough homes (Mohl 11). As a result, neighborhoods became cramped and congested, particularly in the inner city where African Americans and blue-collar workers lived – many of whom were already struggling as a result of departing automobile factories (Mohl 12). Hence, anger festered in Detroit, clearly reflected in the riots: poor housing was the second most commonly stated reason by imprisoned rioters for why they rioted (The Detroit Riot 9). Yet, in a 1968 Senate hearing, John Nichols, superintendent of Detroit's police force, recalled the riots were concentrated in lower middle-class districts, not slums (Riots 1369). Similarly, Detroit Judge James Lincoln, in a memoir, noted that the day the riots began, many buildings on 12th street, the riots' origin, were well constructed (Lincoln 7). Despite many rioters claiming deteriorated living conditions, observations by Nichols and Lincoln suggest otherwise – that

housing, at least, was not a cause of the riots. However, because of inaccuracies and biases associated with memory recall, it remains likely that poor living conditions were a substantial factor in the riots – more so than de facto segregation. Nonetheless, the perspectives of Nichols and Lincoln make this conclusion uncertain.

Traditionalist historians, though, argue the single most significant cause of the riots was police brutality because it created a city prone to violence between Detroit's African American population and police. As early as the 1920s, recurring incidents of police neglect and abuse – including accusations that Detroit's police actively facilitated white destruction of black property – led Detroit's African American population to believe themselves targeted by police for harassment (Farley 207-209). These incidents of police brutality contributed to considerable tensions between many African Americans and law enforcement. Explosive discoveries by the NAACP in the 1950s, which uncovered 103 cases of unprovoked physical assault and use of racial slurs by Detroit's police over a span of two years, only worsened these strains (“Police Brutality Complaints” 488). Consequently, in 1960's Detroit, even a modest police presence in black neighborhoods was prone to triggering violence (Hahn and Feagin 183). Thus, on July 23rd, 1967, when Detroit's police raided a Blind Big (an illegal drinking establishment) on 12th street and arrested all 84 African Americans present, this resentment exploded (Singer 240). Animosity, created by years of perceived mistreatment by law enforcement, motivated hundreds of African Americans to surround the police and begin throwing objects and shouting – marking the beginning of the riots (Singer 240). Later, interviews of rioters found that 94% claimed to have experienced police brutality before the riots and 71% saw anger with the police as the riots' primary cause (Fine 338). While statistics alone rarely determine causation, the reactions to the

police raid and the perspectives of a majority of rioters suggest that anger at the police, representative of police brutality, directly caused the initial violence of the riots.

Holistically, the decentralization of Detroit's automobile industry seems to have been a major cause of the riots: evidence suggests rising unemployment and poverty left many workers frustrated with their situations and city policies. However, out of the many factors that contributed to the riots' formation, police brutality was the most significant, creating a volatile environment between law enforcement and Detroit's African American populace for much of the 1900s. Deteriorating housing and de facto segregation further worsened the experiences of those living in Detroit, though considerable uncertainty surrounds the impact of both due to contesting perspectives from John Nichols, James Lincoln, and others. Nevertheless, the racial and economic issues that plagued Detroit illuminate struggles that the United States collectively faced during the long, hot summer of 1967.

Section C: Reflection

Writing this investigation, I practiced the method of establishing causation while evaluating different perspectives. History is an explanation of the past based on available evidence, which is rarely plentiful. Thus, determining causation is limited because it requires historians to use their own personal interpretations to 'connect the dots' of evidence and perspective – bias is inevitable, but it's often a historian's responsibility to minimize it, which is challenging. For those who experienced the riots first-hand, such as James Lincoln, this challenge is heightened because of the intrinsic role of personal prejudice in memory.

My own initial approach to causation was hardly objective. When I assessed the effects of de facto segregation on the riots, I explored two opposing perspectives: one from Gloria Albrecht, who argued its significance, and one from a national survey of white adults, who

indicated otherwise. Because of my conservative background, biased against racial influence on the riots, I instinctively found the survey more convincing. With this flawed treatment of perspective, I concluded de facto segregation was not a cause of the riots.

However, after reflecting and an ideological shift, I realized that I needed to reevaluate the perspectives objectively – such as through their reliability. Making these revisions, although I ultimately arrived at the same conclusion on de facto segregation, I identified that 1) the national survey I used was likely unrepresentative of Detroit's white population 2) my conclusion had considerable uncertainty. Similar changes were made to my other analytical arguments: I overturned my initial position on deteriorating housing because of the probability of inaccurate recall from John Nichols and James Lincoln. Through this process, I became aware of the importance of perspectives for historians: individual perspectives are always flawed, and thus multiple perspectives are necessary to account for gaps in knowledge and interpret a historical event.

Though, I also realized that interpreting the history of the Detroit Riots is inherently challenging. Because the riots occurred in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, interpretations surrounding the riots have inevitably focused on the racial context behind it. Consequently, sources expressing alternative views are rare. Evidence supporting the riots' racial origins may also have been preserved over other evidence. This limited scope of source material makes it difficult for historians to evaluate economic and political influences on the riots. For those studying the riots, this deficiency may create an overreliance on speculation to connect evidence and produce knowledge.

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