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Retrospective: Detroit riot accelerated suburban shift

Posted by [Ben Lamothe](#) / [Oakland Business Review](#) July 26, 2007 08:18AM

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The riot of 40 years ago marked a turning point not just for Detroit, but for Oakland County and the other metropolitan suburbs.

"I remember the military presence and the smoke in the sky," says Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, then a law student at University of Detroit-Jesuit.

The riot that started to unfold early on July 23, 1967, was a contributing factor to Oakland's rise, but not the only one, he says.

"It picked up when Coleman Young became (mayor of Detroit)," Patterson adds.

Young's management style contributed significantly to "white flight," Patterson believes, citing a loss of 600,000 Detroit residents after the blunt-talking, black mayor's election.

The addition of expressways in Oakland County in the late 1950s, however, did as much to build Oakland as the riot did, Patterson argues.

"The riot was a punctuation mark to a very bad scene."

"In terms of movement of people, if you look at Detroit's population by race over the last 100 years, you see that from the '30s through the '50s Detroit didn't gain very many white people," notes Jim Rogers, data center manager for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in 1974 forcing Detroit to spend more money on education programs for minority inner-city students, and the shift to a black Detroit majority in 1973 also contributed, Rogers says.

SEMCOG data shows population growth of 76 percent in Oakland County between 1960 and 1970. Wayne County registered a growth rate of less than 1 percent.

Oakland County recorded more than 1 million residents in 1980. Wayne County, by then, had lost almost 330,000.

Employment figures tell a similar story. Between 1970 and 1980, Oakland County added about 176,000 workers - a 65-percent increase. Wayne County lost more than 130,000 workers in that period.

It was in those 10 years that the phenomenon of 'white flight' - middle and working class whites moving out of increasingly racially mixed city neighborhoods to mostly white suburbs - became most pronounced.

The proportion of white Detroit residents fell from 70 percent in 1960 to 55 percent by 1970, while the African American population rose from 29 percent to almost 44 percent.

As the riot spread across Detroit, unrest moved up the I-75 corridor to Pontiac and Flint.

Business owners found themselves camping out in their stores, hoping to fend off an impending attack, former Pontiac Mayor Walter Moore remembers.

"The reason that (the riot) occurred is because there was a general feeling that blacks and other minorities were being left out of the mainstream of a lot of different areas, with business being one," he says.

Moore was 21 then. He recalls one store in particular, where the owner learned in advance that his store might be a target of looters. Night fell, the store was broken into and someone died.

Other stores came and went at that site, and the building remains at the corner of Earlmoor Blvd. and Luther Ave. No longer a place of commerce, its windows today are boarded up.

"That was the result of this community backlashing," Moore said. "Whatever happened that night, it tarnished that location."

Yet minority business ownership in Pontiac has dropped off since the riot, which came as African Americans owned many of the city's grocery stores, Moore says.

"I don't think (blacks) own a store in the city of Pontiac now," he said. "We still spend money in the stores - we just don't own them."

With unemployment rates hovering around 7 percent statewide and community programs falling victim to budget cuts, Moore fears that conditions are right once again for civil unrest in the community.

"The intelligent and progressive way to deal with the riots of '67 is realizing there's a strong possibility by the way things are going now, with blacks and minorities being left out, it creates an environment where something similar could happen again," he warns. "If we don't try to turn it around, we're doomed to repeat it in some other way."

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