

RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF WHITE FLIGHT IN THE POSTWAR CITY Detroit, 1945-1980

HEATHER ANN THOMPSON
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Detroit today is a genuinely fearsome-looking place. Most of the neighborhoods appear to be the victims of bombardment—houses burned and vacant, buildings crumbling, whole city blocks overrun with weeds and the carcasses of discarded automobiles.

Z'ev Chafets, "The Tragedy of Detroit"¹

By 1980, whites largely had abandoned the inner city of Detroit. Between 1970 and 1980 alone, more than 310,000 white city residents fled for the suburbs, and the percentage of blacks in Detroit rose from 43.7 to 67.1.² By 1982, Detroit had lost an additional 63,776 residents—mostly white—giving the Motor City one of the highest African American populations in the urban North.³ As journalist Z'ev Chafets pointed out in 1990, "During the last thirty years, the city has lost almost half of its population and there are entire city blocks where all but one or two houses are boarded up and vacant."⁴ To many Detroiters, by the close of the 1980s, the Motor City existed as a mere shadow of its former self.

When Detroit lost its white residents, it also lost a significant portion of its economic base. According to social geographers Bryan Thompson and Robert Sinclair, when white Detroiters left they took "the majority of the important service, professional, and leadership activities of the Detroit Metropolitan system" with them.⁵ By 1980, more than 20 percent of Detroit's largely black population lived below

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The author wishes to thank those who offered comments on this article and on the doctoral thesis from which it is derived, particularly Professors Gary Gerstle, Robin D. G. Kelley, Earl Lewis, Elizabeth Lunbeck, Nell Irvin Painter, and R. Sean Wilentz.*



JOURNAL OF URBAN HISTORY, Vol. 25 No. 2, January 1999 163-198
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the nation's poverty line, and the infant mortality rate in the city had risen to 24.2 percent.⁶ Whereas Detroit became more impoverished after 1973, by 1974 neighboring white Oakland County became "the county with the nation's highest average household-effective buying income."⁷ Whereas the per capita income in Detroit was only \$6,215 in 1980, in neighboring Grosse Pointe Shores, it was \$25,183.⁸ According to Chafets, "Among the nation's major cities, Detroit was at or near the top of unemployment, poverty per capita, and infant mortality throughout the 1980s."⁹

To be sure, the devastation of inner-city Detroit was not caused by white flight alone. Beginning in 1973, the nation as a whole began plummeting into an economic recession. And, by the 1980s, industrial capital largely had fled the urban North for low-wage and nonunion areas of the country and the world. Although a national recession and deindustrialization severely compromised the economic health of urban America, hard times cannot fully explain the devastation that befell Detroit. Every major industrial city in the urban North suffered the recession of the 1970s and deindustrialization of the 1980s—but few suffered to the extent that Detroit did. It was when Detroit lost its white population, tax base, and political support that its future was doomed. As Wilbur Rich notes, Detroit was irreparably harmed by "the impact of changing demographics, especially the loss of revenue occasioned by white flight."¹⁰ As the city grew poorer, its social deterioration escalated, setting in motion a vicious cycle of greater white antipathy toward the inner city and, in turn, greater social malaise.¹¹ As the longtime NAACP leader and former deputy superintendent of the Detroit Public School System, Arthur Johnson, noted bitterly in 1990,

Whites don't know a god damned thing about what's gone wrong here. They say, "Detroit had this, Detroit had that . . ." But economic power is still in the hands of Whites. It's Apartheid. They rape the city and then they come and say, "look what these niggers did to the city" as if they were guiltless.¹²

This snapshot of Detroit makes it clear that any study of the decline of urban America must include an analysis of the postwar phenomenon known as white flight.

While it is widely recognized that America's inner cities had become synonymous with decay as well as depopulation by the 1980s, it is less understood exactly what had happened to cause such decay and to set in motion a white exodus. In the recent literature on the decline of postwar liberalism, the rise of white conservatism, and white flight, a common thesis has emerged. Scholars such as Jim Sleeper, Frederick Siegel, and Jonathan Rieder, for example, suggest that white northerners moved away from the urban center and the liberal fold because of their rational fear of black crime and street upheaval, a natural disgust with urban decay, the increasing welfare dependency of urban blacks, and an equally reasonable belief that their own liberal leaders had abandoned them for this needy, lazy, and often criminal element.¹³ According to Sleeper, whites began to feel "with anguish and rage the immediate impact of rising minority dependency, pathology, crime and the desecration of their communities."¹⁴ Siegel agrees that whites' faith in the liberal creed was eventually "unhinged by riots, muggings, radical rhetoric, and a veritable kulturkampf."¹⁵ It was not that whites abandoned the political tenets of the liberal agenda to eradicate poverty and racial discrimination, but rather, as Jonathan Rieder writes, "crime turned liberalism into a synonym for masochism," and it was the propensity of blacks to commit crimes that caused the noticeable "decline in support for [the] oppressed group" among white community residents.¹⁶

These works go on to suggest that the socially inappropriate behavior of urban blacks gave whites good reason to believe that blacks refused to take responsibility for their own plight, that they were often leeches on liberal programs, and that they rejected the honorable values of other immigrant groups—hard work and individual betterment. Thus, growing white conservatism and white out-migration is explained as a direct consequence of the unacceptable conduct and welfare-induced dependency of blacks. It became increasingly difficult, Sleeper argues, for hard-working whites to feel sympathy for the blacks in welfare houses who "were sleeping off another night of noise and mayhem," and whites were understandably incensed by welfare advocates and recipients who "misunderstood the importance of the obligation to work."¹⁷ Siegel suggests that "the genuine and even awesome successes of the Great Society in reducing poverty" only began

to trouble urban whites when they saw the “social pathology” that flourished in the wake of those advances.¹⁸

The final blow to the viability of postwar liberalism came, these authors argue, when black militants and their white leftist supporters chose to exploit the issue of racism, thus shattering the liberal coalition that urban whites had previously supported. Siegel argues that the black militants’ “emphasis on white racism . . . came at a time when, by almost any measure, racism was declining dramatically,”¹⁹ and Sleeper wonders “whether white-left and black activists and their liberal apologists should have been a little shrewder and refrained from baiting and reviling . . . liberal Whites.”²⁰ Apparently, had the successes of the civil rights movement “not been squandered by the militants”²¹ and had these militants not engaged so readily in “the politics of spite,” whites in the urban center may not have abandoned the cause of racial equality and the tenets of liberalism so willingly.²² When white northerners rejected the politics of liberalism, they were not acting out of an irrational or inborn racial hatred; they had been “pushed” out of the liberal fold by fanatical, self-interested black militants. And when these traditionally liberal whites engaged in racist practices, they were only reacting as a terrified and beleaguered group, sadly disappointed that they could not remain true to their liberal philosophy and coexist with blacks as they would have preferred to do.

This article challenges these views. Clearly, it is not possible to explain growing white conservatism and ensuing white flight simplistically as the product of white racism. It is also historically inaccurate, however, to see urban upheaval and subsequent decay as a creation of northern blacks to which well-intentioned whites were haplessly subjected. Likewise, it is incorrect to locate the roots of white flight in black crime, welfare dependency, or militancy. White Detroiters were not a monolithic group of knee-jerk racists who shrank from anything black and rejected liberalism for addressing the issue of racial discrimination. Nor were they, however, mere victims responding to urban horrors and liberal excesses when they resorted to discriminatory practices or deserted the inner city.

Thomas Sugrue’s recent book, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*,²³ makes this very point and has gone a long way toward debunking much of the prevailing wisdom

about the forces that led to inner-city decline.²⁴ As Sugrue illustrates, white Detroiters actively, and oftentimes violently, resisted the inclusion of black Detroiters in their neighborhoods long before any militant voice was heard in the African American community.²⁵ Indeed, by chronicling the intense battle for all-white neighborhoods waged by white Detroiters throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Sugrue's narrative certainly complicates historical assumptions about who caused the most civil disorder in the Motor City after World War II (WWII). He argues that the dramatic demise of the inner city should be located not in the 1960s but rather in the 1950s as intense segregation, rigid barriers to black employment, and the surprisingly early onset of deindustrialization combined to polarize Detroiters along race and class lines.²⁶

Drawing from Sugrue's work on Detroit, or Arnold Hirsch's study of Chicago during the same period, it becomes clear that one cannot fully understand the dramatic exodus of whites out of the inner city by beginning with the politically fractured and physically decayed urban centers of the 1980s and 1990s and then, working backward in time, reading the present into the past.²⁷ Instead, scholars must begin with the Second Great Migration of southern African Americans to Detroit both during and after WWII and examine how both the white and black community evolved socially and politically thereafter. The Second Great Migration injected the controversial, and ultimately insurmountable, issues of race and urban control into northern liberal politics and touched off many heated battles. Clearly, the postwar battles over housing that Sugrue elucidates exemplify this phenomenon. As the decades of the 1940s and the 1950s unfolded, the politics of race came to shake the very foundation on which city liberalism had been erected and, as a result, civic stability was severely undermined.

This article will argue, however, that just as one cannot tie urban collapse to the alleged liberal or black militant "excesses" of the 1960s, new insights into the tumultuous nature of the 1940s and 1950s should not lead one to sound the death knell for the city too prematurely either. While the early battles over segregated housing were extremely important (and themselves disprove the notion that white flight was sparked by black political extremism or unrealistic expectation), these were only the first of many battles that would be waged by

black and white Detroiters for control of the city between 1945 and 1975. This article will illustrate that it was the escalating and unwavering determination of both black and white Detroiters to shape the social and political landscape of the city *after* those early battles—particularly during the key period 1967-1973—as well as *each* community's growing disenchantment with liberal responses to racial polarization that had the most decisive impact on the long-term viability of this American urban center.

Contrary to much recent scholarship on postwar urban America, Detroit's whites did not totally abandon the inner city or the liberal fold as a result of demographic disruption in the 1940s, battles over housing in the 1950s, welfare and crime in the 1960s, or even in direct response to the riot of 1967. Actually, it was after the riot that black and white Detroiters waged a series of protracted battles, for equality and control, respectively, in neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, courtrooms, and, most important, *vis-à-vis* law enforcement. And, significantly, the *conclusive* battle was not fought until 1973. That year, whites finally lost full *political* control of the city in a bitterly contested mayoral election.²⁸ It was not until whites experienced this devastating and irrevocable loss that they finally conceded defeat and decided to withdraw their troops from the battlefield for good. The exodus from the city that followed this election proved disastrous for Detroit since fleeing whites took much of the urban tax base, commercial enterprises, and manufacturing base with them.²⁹ This white abandonment, in combination with the severe recession economy that also followed the 1973 election, is what made the collapse of the Motor City a virtual certainty. Clearly, one must locate white flight in the complex social and political history of the city over the course of the entire postwar period and, particularly, in the decisive events that took place in both the white and black community after 1967.

Between 1910 and 1966, the number of African Americans living outside of the South rose from 800,800 to 9.7 million—an elevenfold increase.³⁰ The most concentrated movement of people occurred during the years around World War I (WWI) and WWII as the labor markets of the northern cities opened up to blacks. Although much scholarly attention has been paid to the Great Migration during WWI, in fact the Second Great Migration during and after WWII was far more

striking—both quantitatively and qualitatively—because of the impact it had on the urban center and its workplaces. Of the 6.5 million blacks who moved from the rural South to the urban North between 1910 and 1970, 5.5 million of them migrated after 1940.³¹ As a result of this massive migration, the spatial geography of cities such as Detroit was fundamentally altered, the urban working class was dramatically recomposed, and, within the city's African American and ethnic white communities, a completely new set of social as well as political beliefs and expectations began to emerge.

For African American migrants to Detroit, the sojourn north had been fueled by an intense desire to participate fully and equally in the social, economic, and political life of the city to which they were moving. When Detroit became their home, that desire only intensified, leading them to greater social and political activism. The ethnic and native-born whites who had called Detroit their home long before WWII, however, shared an equally fervent desire to maintain the racial status quo as well as their dominance in the social and political spheres. As increasing numbers of African Americans poured into the Motor City after 1945, and as these African Americans, from every class position, escalated their drive for social, economic, and political equality, ethnically diverse Detroiters sought unity in their identity as "white Detroiters." Their desire to maintain the racial status quo as well as their hold on city power only intensified.³²

During the twenty years that followed the Second Great Migration, the chasm between how the African American and ethnic white communities each envisioned the future of city, as well as workplace relations, widened.³³ As Detroiters came to see the future of their city in increasingly dichotomous ways, the Motor City lurched slowly but inevitably toward social and political crisis.

In 1951, neither the white nor the black community in Detroit saw the issue of race relations as insurmountable, yet each recognized that it was a very real concern—one that could potentially polarize the city. A detailed survey of the city's white and black population, conducted by the Detroit Board of Commerce in 1951, revealed that 47 percent of whites and 41 percent of blacks thought that "Negro-White Relations" was in the top-three issues that were "most important to do something about in Detroit."³⁴ A full 20 percent of city whites and 26 percent of

city blacks surveyed thought that race relations was the top most important issue to address.³⁵ What would make race relations more, not less, volatile over time was the fact that the city's black and white communities came to hold very different ideas about what exactly should be done to bring racial stability to Detroit.

Immediately after WWII and into the 1950s, the issue in Detroit that most often split city residents along racial lines was housing—particularly the proposed construction of public housing.³⁶ The first thing that southern blacks needed when they came to Detroit was a place to live. In the earliest years of migration, many black Detroiters lived on the city's lower east side in the so-called Black Bottom. In 1945, more than 98 percent of the lower east side was black. Only 8 percent of these residents owned their home, which left 92 percent renters.³⁷ After 1950, the African American population of Detroit voluntarily and involuntarily began to seek housing outside of the lower east side. As the black community began to insist on integrated and equitable housing in Detroit, racial tensions escalated accordingly.

Black Detroiters surveyed in 1951 were fairly optimistic that, with the help of their active civil rights leadership, conflicts, such as those over housing, could be resolved peacefully. The fact that organizations like the NAACP were so willing to take on the issue of housing discrimination fueled much of this optimism, as did the abiding faith that the North was utterly different from the South and thus segregation would eventually be an anathema.

The black community's insistence that city housing be integrated, and the activism of the NAACP to that end, however, convinced many whites that race relations were, in fact, getting much worse. Many city whites held steadfastly to the belief that segregation was the way to achieve racial harmony. Several whites surveyed in 1951 made their distaste for integrated neighborhoods quite clear. One white Detroiters wrote, "I'd like to see the city sectioned off and have different races sectioned off and each live in their own area. I hate to see a territory invaded, like by colored."³⁸ The desire for segregation was expressed a different way by another white respondent who wrote, "Send them to Africa. Make a community of their own. Send them back South. Send them."³⁹ Another wrote, "I don't like all the mixing with the colored

people. They're moving into this neighborhood and there is nothing you can do about it."⁴⁰

While most whites accepted blacks' presence in the city, their vision of how and where blacks should live in that city was increasingly out of synch with the vision of blacks themselves. The white community tended to want a segregated city, whereas the black community wanted total integration. In 1951, while only 2 percent of white Detroiters surveyed suggested keeping blacks out of Detroit entirely or sending them back to the South, a full 68 percent advocated some form of city segregation when they were asked what should be done about Negro-white relations.⁴¹

During the 1950s, it was not only the issue of housing that began to divide the white and black communities along racial lines. Education, employment, and law enforcement also contributed dramatically to the contending views of what Detroit should be. Of these issues, the one that served to divide the black and white communities the most after migration, and what fueled their divergent visions of Detroit, was law enforcement.

In the years following the Second Great Migration, whenever conflicts would erupt over the contentious issues of housing, education, or employment, it was the Detroit Police Department (DPD) that was charged with restoring law and order. Yet as the decade of the 1950s unfolded, increasing numbers of black citizens began to feel that the police singled them out for harassment and punishment, that police officers were themselves racially biased, and that the police did not serve and protect blacks and whites equally. In 1951, 21 percent of Detroit blacks surveyed, compared with only 4 percent of whites, "included the Police Department as one of the three most important matters that needs attention in the city."⁴² One black respondent noted that the police "are too prejudiced. All Negroes look alike to them; they can't tell a good Negro from a bad one."⁴³ Another suggested that "the police shouldn't be so quick to shoot and go into homes and wreck them as they do some Negro homes."⁴⁴

As with housing, education, and employment, local civil rights leaders tackled the issue of discrimination within law enforcement openly and actively. In 1957, the NAACP conducted "an analysis of

police brutality complaints reported to the Detroit Branch NAACP in the period from January 1, 1956 to July 30, 1957.⁴⁵ With this report, the NAACP intended to bring the city's attention to what it felt was rampant discriminatory behavior on the part of the DPD and to make suggestions for ameliorating the problem. The organization noted in its report that it had received 103 complaints and that the most frequent type of complaint stemmed from "physical assault followed by racial epithets."⁴⁶ To correct this situation and mend police-community relations, the NAACP suggested "organizing a representative biracial citizens group to make a survey of the police department and recommend improvements based on their findings."⁴⁷ As with housing, education, and employment, however, the white community as a whole did not appear to share this penchant for integrated, interracial solutions.

As the 1950s drew to a close, both the black and white communities in Detroit had come to see the same city in very different ways. The experience of the Second Great Migration fueled the black community's faith in the possibility that African Americans could live in an integrated and nondiscriminatory city. Their experiences in Detroit during the 1950s made them even more committed to creating such a city once it became abundantly clear that it did not yet exist. Whites, however, had sought to maintain the status quo from the earliest days of the migration, and, as the 1950s unfolded, their commitment to maintaining community power and to keeping the city racially segregated only intensified. As the survey of 1951 concluded, "deep differences of attitude divide Detroiters most notable are differences on race relations and labor-management relations . . . on race and on economic group interests, major forces pull the community in opposed directions."⁴⁸

Yet while the issue of race had become more palpable and increasingly divisive over the course of the 1950s, fueling repeated acts of ugly violence, neither the white nor the black community was yet convinced that their vision of the city would not triumph. Issues of housing, education, employment, and law enforcement clearly reflected an increased degree of racial polarization and showed that the social and political agenda of city whites and blacks had diverged dramatically between 1945 and 1960. But in 1961, it appeared that a new day was dawning in the Motor City. That year, black and white Detroiters

reached a political compromise, and, for that moment, the future looked bright to all. After 1961, Detroiters looked forward to their city becoming a “model city,” home to a coalition of liberal voters both black and white. The Motor City was to be a place where blacks and whites would, to a degree never seen before, work toward creating a Great Society.

Indeed, the year 1961 was a watershed in Detroit’s political history. Despite the racial tensions that had simmered and flared in the city throughout the previous decade, a young liberal newcomer, Jerome Cavanagh, had successfully appealed to a racial cross section of liberal democratic voters and won the office of mayor. Cavanagh held out hope to both black and white voters that each would have a secure niche in city politics and each equally would affect how racial tensions in the city would be resolved.⁴⁹

By the mid-1960s, Detroit’s eventual demise was by no means a foregone conclusion. According to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Detroit had everything the Great Society could wish for in a municipality” including two black congressmen as well as “a splendid mayor and a fine governor.”⁵⁰ It seemed that Detroit had “found the road to racial peace in the programs and policies instituted by [Mayor Jerome] Cavanagh, with assistance from the Democratic administrations in Washington.”⁵¹

The Cavanagh administration in Detroit fully shared Washington’s penchant for addressing the needs of the urban poor through a plethora of committees and social programs. After 1964, liberal leaders in Detroit pushed hard for projects like Head Start, the Model Cities/Model Neighborhood Project, and, more generally, a local extension of the Community Action Program (CAP).⁵² In Detroit, CAP took the form of the “City of Detroit Mayor’s Committee, Total Action Against Poverty,” or TAP. TAP was premised on the same hopes as the national CAP—that institutions would respond in positive ways to urban protest, and the protesting urban poor would accept the necessity of compromise.⁵³ TAP soon spawned four neighborhood community action centers and eight subcenters, each providing services to the city’s disadvantaged residents.

Throughout the 1960s, the activities of Detroit’s NAACP and Urban League, each considered a mouthpiece of the black community in

city politics, became virtually synonymous with the activities of the city's antipoverty campaigns. Indeed, it was the very presence and activism of black civil rights leaders within the new liberal coalition of Detroit that pushed the myriad social programs to address the poverty issue less in the abstract and more explicitly in terms of race.

By 1965, however, it began to greatly concern the civil rights leadership of Detroit that, despite Cavanagh's election, the economic inequality of whites and blacks in the city appeared to be staying the same at best and, quite possibly, getting worse. Complaints filed with the NAACP and the Michigan Civil Rights Commission in this period indicate that white employers still actively resisted admitting blacks to the higher paying occupations, white merchants still charged exorbitant amounts for food and clothing in neighborhood stores, and white landlords continued to overcharge for housing, while white real estate agents attempted to relegate blacks to the least developed and most impoverished neighborhoods in the city. Indeed, the racially based economics of housing was still one of the most serious problems facing Detroit's black citizens from every socioeconomic background.⁵⁴

Unemployment continued to be another serious and chronic problem for blacks in Detroit despite the economic prosperity of the city in general. According to a Detroit Planning Commission report, by 1970, in one Detroit neighborhood, more than 90 percent of the total number of applicants for what residents viewed as "decent jobs" were black; 96 percent of those applicants were unemployed. At one neighborhood employment center, between January 1 and May 31, 1970, there were 1,173 applicants: 1,139 black, 33 white, of which 1,132 fell below the poverty level.⁵⁵ It was not uncommon in some black neighborhoods for the general unemployment rate to hover above 15.8 percent and for the unemployment rate of 18- to 24-year-olds to be more than 38 percent.⁵⁶ This staggering black unemployment existed in a city whose overall unemployment rate had bottomed out at a fifteen-year low of 3.8 percent in 1968.⁵⁷

The social cost of this economic deprivation for the poorer sections of the black community in Detroit was enormous. Throughout the 1960s, numbers of unemployed black Detroiters were forced onto the welfare rolls. While the effects of job and housing discrimination frayed the social fabric of many black families, and while many of the

breadwinners in black families were forced to apply for welfare benefits, white Detroiters increasingly began to suspect that blacks had a greater propensity to be lazy—incapable of ascribing to the time-honored value of hard work.

White Detroiters who came to hold this view of blacks in the city rarely evaluated their own complicity in the creation of economic distress in the black community. In addition, because they were blind to the very real class differences within the black community itself, their suspicion that blacks were turning Detroit into a haven for welfare leeches was ill informed. In fact, in January 1965 few families in the city of Detroit were receiving government relief, and by no means were all of the Detroiters receiving aid black.⁵⁸ Furthermore, white Detroiters greatly overestimated the extent to which blacks who did receive welfare payments could financially benefit from that system. As late as 1971, the Detroit Charter Revision Commission (DCRC) reported that persons on welfare received only forty-four dollars per month to cover “food, clothing, school expenses, entertainment, bus fare, personal care, everything.”⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the reality of the relationship between black Detroiters and welfare, throughout the 1960s whites became increasingly convinced that blacks were milking the system.

Whereas battles over housing, schools, and jobs each still fueled much of the racial conflict that plagued Detroit, by the mid-1960s it was again the issue of law enforcement that generated the most insurmountable racial conflicts. In fact, it was the actions of the DPD that plunged Detroit, which had for years just simmered with tension and conflict, into a full-blown urban crisis. Although the city had become increasingly integrated over the course of the 1950s, the fact that there were still few blacks in the ranks of the DPD generated myriad problems.

By 1965, Detroit blacks had heard too many tales of friends and relatives being mistreated by the police. Although incidents in which Detroit police officers overlooked white citizen harassment of blacks (or ignored the physical assault of blacks taken into custody) infuriated black Detroiters, it was the fact that these incidents happened on a routine basis that inflamed them. Between May 1961 and February 1964, for example, there were 1,507 “altercations” between the police and Detroit citizens, resulting in the injury of 1,041 citizens, the ma-

majority of them black. Of those citizen injuries, 690 were injuries to the head. In those same altercations, 580 police officers were also injured, and, significantly, 303 of those injuries were to the hands, knuckles, and fingers of the police officers.⁶⁰ Despite alarming statistics such as these, Police Commissioner Ray Girardin continued to maintain that “while Detroit’s citizens can be divided into many categories—racial, religious, political, economic—the police will divide them into only two: those who obey the law and those who don’t.”⁶¹

The discriminatory actions of Detroit police officers, both within their own department and in the community, indicate that they did not view blacks the same way as whites. Innumerable complaints filed with both the NAACP and with the police department itself in the 1960s offer striking evidence that by the 1960s, these officers were predisposed to see blacks as more of a criminal element in the city than whites. Thus, not surprisingly, officers from the DPD arrested blacks in far greater numbers than whites during this period. In 1964, for example, 31,541 blacks were arrested and eventually tried as compared with 16,430 whites.⁶² Of the 67,385 total arrests in 1967, 46,911 were of blacks and 21,474 were of whites.⁶³ In 1975, there were 52,890 blacks arrested and 13,776 whites.⁶⁴ In addition, black women were much more likely to be arrested and successfully prosecuted than white women. In 1964, 4,250 black women were arrested compared with 1,215 white women, and in 1967, 5,854 black women were arrested as compared with 1,823 white women.⁶⁵ Not only did the Detroit police officers arrest far more blacks than whites, they also singled them out for investigation far more often. In 1965, out of the 1,499 persons investigated for narcotics activity, 1,220 were black and 279 were white.⁶⁶ In 1967, of 3,539 investigated, 2,863 were black and 676 were white.⁶⁷

The escalating numbers of black arrests in the city fueled white Detroiters’ belief that with more blacks had come more crime. This belief was seemingly supported by the fact that it was disproportionately black faces that were paraded across the screen in handcuffs on the nightly news, and it was usually blacks who were written about in the crime section of the local newspapers. Thus, as the 1960s wore on, white Detroiters increasingly began to feel that not only were black

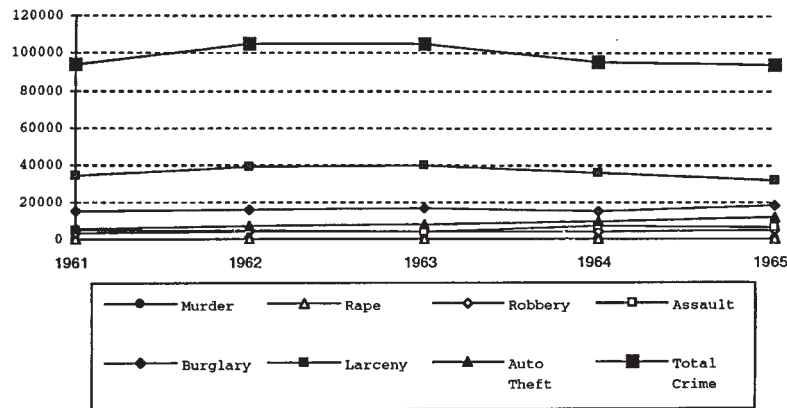


Figure 1: Crimes Committed in Detroit: 1961-1965

SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty-Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

Detroiters leeches off of the government and city coffers, they were also turning the city into a crime-infested danger zone.

Drawing from arrest figures alone, it is extremely difficult to conclusively disprove this notion that blacks simply committed more crimes than whites. The indisputable evidence of racial discrimination on the part of the Detroit police officers in this period, however, should make scholars skeptical of this interpretation. An examination of the crime rate in Detroit over the course of the 1960s offers some compelling evidence that blacks were indeed being singled out disproportionately for investigation and arrest and that, thus, white perceptions about crime were, in fact, ill informed.

Contrary to the perception of city whites, crime was not dramatically on the rise during the early 1960s. In fact, between 1961 and 1965, the total number of crimes committed in Detroit (including such heinous crimes as murder and assault) actually dropped from 104,983 to 94,266 (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Even when fluctuations in Detroit's population are taken into account, the crime rate remained stable during this period.⁶⁸ Interestingly, however, even though the

TABLE 1
Crimes Committed in Detroit: 1961-1965

	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
Murder	136	131	125	125	188
Rape	315	333	393	475	648
Robbery	3,397	4,206	4,608	4,739	5,498
Assault	5,052	5,134	4,496	7,804	6,410
Burglary	15,300	16,636	16,963	15,839	18,460
Larceny	34,337	38,993	39,810	36,375	32,499
Auto theft	6,164	7,289	8,418	9,610	12,661
Total crime	94,353	104,983	104,773	95,457	94,266

SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

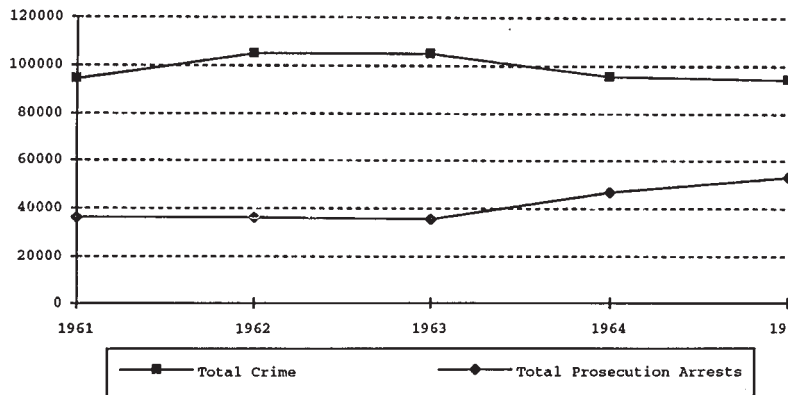


Figure 2: Total Crime versus Total Prosecution Arrests: 1961-1965

SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

number of crimes committed in the Motor City were at a four-year low in 1965, the number of prosecution arrests (citizens arrested and brought to trial but not necessarily convicted) was at a four-year high (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Thus, more Detroiters, primarily black Detroiters, were being arrested even though there were fewer crimes be-

TABLE 2
Total Crime versus Total Prosecution Arrests: 1961-1965

	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
Total crime	94,353	104,983	104,773	95,457	94,266
Total prosecution arrests	36,242	36,332	35,420	46,971	53,035

SOURCE: *Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison*, The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

ing committed. Of course, this noticeable rise in black arrests between 1961 and 1965 simply fueled white fears of black criminality.

Since the crime rate in Detroit had not increased, either whites had simply stopped committing crimes to the extent they had prior to the arrival of more city blacks or blacks were being disproportionately singled out for arrest. Just as white perceptions about blacks and welfare were largely skewed, so too were their perceptions about blacks and crime. Few city whites probably realized that even though there were 125 murders committed in the city in 1964, in 1955 there had actually been 140 homicides.⁶⁹ Despite the fact that the street crime rate per 1,000 persons in 1965 was actually only 1.6 percent,⁷⁰ whites were deeply worried that the streets were filled with black criminals. Thus, whites pressured the police department to take an even harder line in the city and increase its patrol of black neighborhoods. White hostility to inner-city blacks escalated between 1961 and 1965. They were convinced that blacks had turned Detroit into a crime mecca.

Between 1965 and 1970, however, it appears that whites' fears about crime in the city were vindicated. Crime was indeed on the rise in these years. Between 1965 and 1970, the total number of crimes in the city took a dramatic jump from 94,266 to 192,866 (see Figures 3 and 4). But as an exhaustive two hundred-page statistical and analytical study of the DPD conducted by Wayne State University in 1970 makes clear, crime statistics and arrest figures (and thus white perceptions about crime) were extremely misleading after 1965.⁷¹ During this period, the DPD revamped its statistical system for both categorizing and quantifying crime.

This methodological overhaul of the DPD's crime-reporting procedures had a dramatic effect on the city's reported crime rate. For exam-

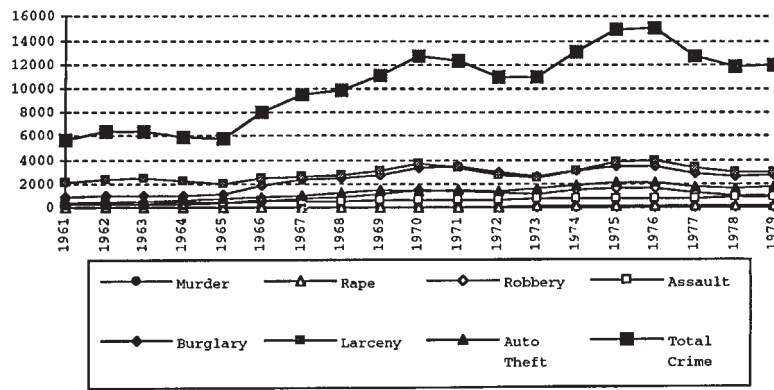


Figure 3: Crimes Committed in Detroit per 100,000 Residents: 1961-1979
 SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty-Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit. "Data Books, 1961-1979," The City of Detroit Public Health Department; calculation by author.

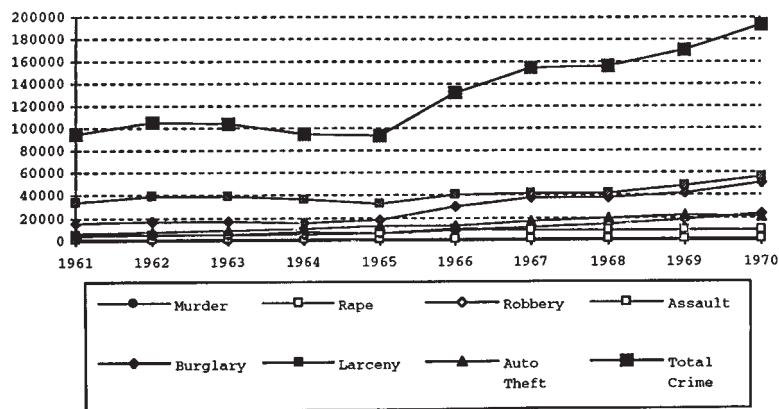


Figure 4: Crimes Committed in Detroit: 1961-1970
 SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

ple, "In 1964-65 larcenies dropped . . . by 3,876 and assaults dropped by 11,394. In 1965-1966 [however] due to the altered reporting proce-

dures, larcenies skyrocketed by 8,339 in one year and assaults jumped by 1,083 cases.⁷² Between 1965 and 1966, due to these recording and reporting changes,

there was an increase of 25,242 in the total of [five] crimes. Yet there was only an increase of 1,944 in terms of clearances, [those arrested who were actually brought to trial] and only a mere 946 case increase in prosecutions.

Between 1965 and 1970, the distinction between crimes like larceny and assault was increasingly made by the police detectives themselves, and, because policemen could “alter crimes at will,” public perceptions of crime could easily be manipulated and swayed.

While numerically speaking, “in the period 1965-1966 every crime increased sharply,” even the police commissioner, Ray Girardin, acknowledged that this was due primarily to the DPD’s “changes in crime reporting.” As he noted, in the 1966 annual report of the department, “therefore on paper crime shows a definite increase while actual crime rose only 6 percent. These statistics do not indicate such a large crime increase in the Detroit area, but rather greater efficiency in recording criminal acts.”⁷³ However, analysts of the police department doubted that it had simply been striving for greater efficiency. As one statistician put it after dissecting police figures on crime, “The Detroit Police Department has been playing games with statistics to cloud issues, justify expenditures, create false fears and alienations, and to hide its inadequacies.” Analysts were thoroughly convinced that the police officers had engaged in the “manipulation of crime statistics for their own interests,” desire as they did to spend more city dollars.⁷⁴

Because police officials had never provided “themselves with a formula that they should use to temper the *new* statistics so that they will compare with the old ones as not to mislead the public as well as themselves,”⁷⁵ white fears about black criminality and the safety of the inner city were fanned between 1965 and 1970 in Detroit. Even though whites began to dub Detroit the “murder capital of the world” by 1970, in reality homicide prosecutions dropped 32.2 percent between 1961 and 1969.⁷⁶ And while white Detroiters believed that it was more dangerous to live in the inner city in 1970 than ever before because of the risk of burglary, in fact, “the Detroit Police Department had neither

cleared nor prosecuted any more [burglary] cases in 1969 than it had done in any other year going back as far as 1961."⁷⁷

Although the white community in the city was swayed into believing in the general criminality of black Detroit by the numbers of blacks taken into custody and by the statistics of the DPD, the black community and many white liberal leaders in the city were not. Several scholars have argued that the black middle class shared white middle-class hostility toward blacks who lived in poverty and associated them with a criminal element as well. Indeed, Sugrue suggests that "these [middle-class] blacks shared a common set of aspirations with white Detroiters" including the desire to live far away from crime and disorder.⁷⁸ It is critical to point out, however, that members of the black middle class had no illusions about the ways in which the link between crime and race was too easily made and how an alleged fear of poor blacks was oftentimes used to maintain white control in the city.

As Richard V. Marks of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations (CCR) wrote, "The 'crime in the streets' issue is more than a 'fact' stated about white or black criminality. . . . It is in reality a euphemism for hold-the-line government and community policy regarding the Negro struggle for civil rights, jobs, etc."⁷⁹ It angered Marks and many of Detroit's black citizens that whites were increasingly taking the moral high ground when it came to advocating a safer city. Marks stated emphatically that black Detroiters were as opposed to crime as white Detroiters were and that they were just "as desperately concerned that there will be proper policing in their communities as any other citizen in our city."⁸⁰ A black Detroit, Leigins S. Moore, wrote to a local clergyman, Reverend Charles Williams, "we, too, believe in law and order. . . . We do not wish to give any comfort to the hoodlum and law violators."⁸¹ The reality was that many poor and middle-class black Detroiters had come to fear the police as much as criminals by 1967. Every day, the general harassment and daily intimidation of black citizens by the police fueled their fear and anger to an immeasurable degree.

By 1965, despite the hopes of Cavanagh and all of his supporters both white and black, Detroit had become engulfed in a social and political crisis. While racial hostilities always had simmered in Detroit,

since 1945 they had largely been contained. By 1965, however, these tensions threatened to blow Detroit's white-led liberal coalition apart. A full decade after some of the most dramatic battles over segregated housing had taken place, the politics of race came to inform the behavior and politics of thousands of Detroit residents, both white and black, in unprecedented ways.

To working-class and poor black Detroiters in 1965, the fact that a largely black city was still governed, managed, taught, and represented by whites—despite the efforts of the civil rights leadership and the promises of the Cavanagh administration to achieve greater African American representation—had become intolerable. These blacks had begun to lose faith in not only the efficacy of a liberal agenda for social progress but also the cooperative, biracial strategies of their own civil rights leadership. To white Detroiters in 1965, it had begun to appear as if the liberals' war on poverty and the black community's decades-long war on segregation and discrimination were simply one and the same. Whites grew to resent the fact that blacks were now laying claim not only to the entire city but also to the liberal political agenda itself. Worse yet, it appeared to whites as if liberal leaders in both Detroit and Washington had begun to cater exclusively to their black constituents.

By the mid-1960s, local civil rights leaders were well aware that the city teetered on the brink of disaster. They, themselves, were deeply frustrated by the barriers to social change faced by the more progressive liberals in city hall. Despite their class privilege, these black leaders had also been stung repeatedly by continuing racial discrimination in Detroit, and they recognized full well that if they did not somehow bring about change quickly, someone else would. As civil rights activist Dr. Albert Wheeler put it before a meeting of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission,

[There is a] large mass of human beings [that] has been on the side lines hoping against hope that NAACP, the Urban League, CORE, ACLU, and Federal, State, and Local civil rights Commissions were going to open new doors for training, for opportunity, for family life, and for human dignity. But day-by-day and year-by-year, defeats which these groups experience only add to the bitterness of the human beings in the ghetto and drives younger people into the camps of the militants and the black nationalists.⁸²

Of those “militants,” Wheeler warned the rest of the civil rights leaders who were present,

This is a relatively small group whose future and destiny depend upon whether you as public officials continue to bury your heads in the sands of unreality or whether you face the racial issue honestly and courageously.⁸³

On July 22, 1967, a portion of poor black Detroit finally did what everyone had feared most—it set city neighborhoods ablaze, and thus the infamous Detroit Riot of 1967 began. What few scholars of Detroit in this period recognize is that this riot, which in fact was a rebellion, was in many ways the beginning, not the final expression, of the crisis in the city. The riot itself was largely an incoherent and ineffective, albeit dramatic, attack on the power inequities and on the behavior of the DPD in a racially polarized city. It was *after* the riot that black community opposition to the DPD reached fever pitch, and the greatest number of complaints were filed by citizens against the DPD (477 in 1971 as compared with 105 in 1965).⁸⁴ It was also *after* the riot that the black community launched an all-out assault on the racial discrimination still evident in the city’s schools, workplaces, and courtrooms, and that loose black nationalist ideas and phrases were transformed into specific militant organizations that advocated new and controversial strategies for changing the Motor City. It was years *after* the riot that whites waged their most determined battles to control the city.

The Cavanagh administration and the black civil rights leadership’s response to the urban upheaval and legitimacy crisis of July 1967 was to set up, as well as to endorse, various committees and commissions charged with locating the roots of dissent and with attempting to address grievances. Through organizations such as the Mayor’s Development Team and the New Detroit Committee, liberal leaders, both black and white, worked feverishly to mend the fractured city and to repair fissures in the liberal coalition. City leaders set their sites on the mayoral election of 1969 in the hope that their candidate, black liberal Richard Austin, could speak to the needs of all Detroiters and thus defeat white law enforcement candidate Roman Gribbs, who had “made crime in the streets—for many whites, a nagging, deep fear—his key issue, and [he] hammered day after day on it.”⁸⁵

In what Joseph Darden has described as the “closest political contest in the city’s history,”⁸⁶ on November 4, 1969, Roman Gribbs became mayor of Detroit with 257,312 votes to Austin’s 250,000.⁸⁷ As the *Detroit Free Press* put it,

quietly, and with little fanfare, the majority of Detroit’s white voters went to the polls on Tuesday and cast their ballots for Roman Gribbs. . . . Gribbs received about 85 percent of the white vote and about 4 percent of the vote in the black community.⁸⁸

But if white Detroiters had hoped that the ousting of a liberal mayor with civil rights sympathies would restore the racial status quo or discourage black activism, events that unfolded in the city between 1969 and 1973 left them sorely disappointed and even more disaffected with the Motor City. Indeed, Gribbs’s victory did not spell the end for the liberal leadership in Detroit—particularly because liberal voters had managed to retain all six liberal incumbents and add three new liberals (including a third African American) to the city council.⁸⁹ Gribbs’s victory also did not defuse activism in the black community. The combination of Gribbs’s pro-law enforcement platform and Austin’s defeat in the electoral arena not only led poor and working-class blacks to become even more politically active, but it made them far more radical than Austin had ever been. In fact, after 1969, black disaffection with the electoral process reached an all-time high. As a black community activist put it after Austin’s defeat, “blacks will now begin to move through collective power in many areas other than [electoral] politics.”⁹⁰

Indeed, it was after the rebellion of 1967, but more specifically after the election of 1969, that Detroit witnessed the birth of a new grass-roots black challenge to the existing social and political inequities in the city—one that became increasingly disenchanted with liberal strategies for reform and thus posed an enormous threat to city liberal leaders and newly conservative white voters alike.

The number of vocal blacks outraged with the actions of the DPD also continued to multiply after 1969 as it became clear that the DPD was simply refusing to reform its ways. In their opinion, the DPD had actually become even more aggressive since Gribbs was elected. With Mayor Gribbs’s blessing, the DPD formed a special undercover decoy

unit called STRESS in January 1971, which stood for Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets. STRESS was just what Gribbs had promised his overwhelmingly white constituency—a tougher division within the DPD that would target crime in the city's poor neighborhoods. After the birth of STRESS, the already severely strained relationship between the police and the black community deteriorated further as STRESS officers killed an alarming number of city blacks taken into their custody.

Although few Detroiters thought the situation in the city could become much more tense than it had been during the July insurrection, in fact it got progressively worse thereafter. Before 1967, black and white liberal leaders tried to make Detroit a better place to live and were, essentially, trying to *prevent* civil unrest from erupting. In 1969, these leaders attempted to undo the damage of the riot by supporting Austin. After Austin's defeat in 1969, however, a noticeable number of ordinary black citizens decided to make Detroit a better place on their own by drawing *from* the very anger and frustration that had sparked the riot and by explicitly rejecting electoral solutions to Detroit's problems. It was after 1969, for example, that black radical activism in grassroots city and plant organizations such as Parents and Students for Community Control, The Black Student United Front, The National Committee to Combat Fascism (the local Panthers), and Revolutionary Union Movements in the auto plants all flourished. In response to this, wary white residents dug in their heels and continued, with renewed energy, to do everything in their power to maintain their control in the city.

Between 1965 and 1970, white disaffection from Great Society liberalism had to do primarily with the recipients of its War on Poverty programs, whom white Detroiters thought were abusing the system. After 1970, however, they became increasingly disenchanted with the actual architects of these programs—the liberal leadership itself, both local and national. Specifically, it was after the acquittal verdicts in a series of controversial legal battles between 1969 and 1973—distinct cases in which city blacks were on trial for killing whites such as a number of police officers and plant foremen—that white Detroiters became as hostile to white liberal leaders as to the blacks within the liberal coalition.⁹¹ During these trials, black radicals in the city inad-

vertently found a new venue in which to air their grievances against white authority in the city—their struggle had moved unexpectedly off the streets and into the city's courtrooms. White Detroiters viewed the trials—proceedings in which black defendants were each time acquitted, and, oftentimes, radical defense attorneys managed to make accusers feel like the accused—as confirmation that liberals had abandoned them for criminal blacks. In their minds, by 1970, Detroit's liberals were no longer just facilitating dependency through their myriad community programs in the ghetto; now they were actually catering to black criminals in their own courtrooms. White Detroiters who had long considered themselves New Deal Democrats came to believe that something had fundamentally changed within the liberal agenda, and they felt betrayed. Those who had always been suspicious of that agenda felt vindicated.

Detroit's liberal leaders (be they politicians, administrators, hearing referees, or judges) viewed matters very differently. While national liberalism had shifted rightward, in an attempt to appease increasingly critical white constituents, Detroit liberals clung to the more progressive elements of that ideology. In local electoral battles, such as that in 1969, Detroit liberals were unabashedly and vocally opposed to more conservative solutions for the city. This was, in part, because to embrace them would have meant risking the all-so-important black vote—a vote that was far more critical for local electoral victory than national. But additionally, in the minds of Detroit's liberal leaders, the fact that black and white Detroiters were resolving their differences in courtrooms instead of on city streets was testimony to the strength and very successes of progressively construed liberalism. If blacks accused of serious crimes in Detroit could now receive a fair trial before a jury of their peers, then the liberal agenda had indeed made in-roads into entrenched racial discrimination within the city. According to Detroit liberals, the trials of this period were not about criminals winning out over cops; rather, they were a glowing example of how any violation of black civil rights, even by members of law enforcement, would be effectively censured in the judicial process. These verdicts were not about black criminals getting away with murder; they were a shining example of the American legal system

stretching to its most liberal and progressive limits and considering present wrongs in the context of past evils.

Contrary to what many white Detroiters firmly believed, the perspective that these liberal city leaders had on the legal battles of this period, and on the channeling of black dissent into the legal arena, was not a radical departure from their original ideology. The outcomes of the controversial trials of 1969-1973 were merely practical applications of their long-held principle that white atonement for racial sins was a component of making progress toward racial equality.⁹³ The pragmatic applications of lofty liberal principles, however, did more than just strain the already rocky relationship between white Detroit and Detroit's liberal leaders; they severed that relationship completely. When the struggle for racial equality changed venue from the streets to the courtrooms, the fate of liberalism in Detroit was sealed. By March 1973, many whites in Detroit began to actively seek out a new political niche and began to plan ways finally to wrest control of the city from liberals and blacks.

Just as whites were stunned by the various legal decisions that indicated that liberals were trying to appease black Detroit, so were Detroit's poor and working-class black citizens. Whereas white Detroiters were alienated, dismayed, and deeply resentful of these decisions (and of the city liberals who facilitated them), black Detroiters were heartened and newly hopeful. Between 1967 and 1970, poor and working-class blacks had come to believe firmly that white liberals were incapable of addressing their grievances and were unwilling to give them a fair hearing within the legal system, and that middle-class black leaders also were unable to substantively advance the cause of racial equality. As ordinary African Americans moved their own battles for social equality off the city streets and into the courtrooms, however, they were shocked to see that the tide had turned—at least in part—in their favor. Like local whites, these blacks had not predicted that the liberals in Detroit would respond to the urban crisis by pushing their social and political agenda to its most progressive limits. Also, like city whites, they mistakenly assumed that these liberals had experienced a change of heart.

In fact, not only had their principles not changed, neither had the ways in which liberals responded practically to urban problems. As

the myriad TAP programs illustrate, Detroit liberal leaders had always tried to channel dissent off the streets and into established institutions and had always used money as the means to effect social and ideological transformations. As the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s makes clear, they invariably encouraged flexible interpretations of the law to eliminate discrimination. However, the consistency between Detroit's liberal agenda of 1973 and that of 1965 escaped blacks and whites alike. Each group felt that, for better or worse, liberal leaders had changed their stripes.

These perceptions about shifting liberal loyalties had enormous implications for the direction that both white and black politics would take in the city. Blacks who had long been disenchanted with electoral politics and liberal politicians turned out in unprecedented numbers during the mayoral election of 1973 to make sure that their candidate Coleman Young (a liberal Democrat, an outspoken champion of civil rights, and a vocal critic of the police department) would win that office. The crisis of legitimacy within the black civil rights leadership had passed. Simultaneously, and fueled equally by the belief that city liberals had taken a noticeable ideological turn, white Detroiters mobilized with a vengeance to make sure that their candidate, John Nichols (the commissioner of police and founder of STRESS), would win the office of mayor and rescue Detroit.

On November 7, 1973, tensions ran high as city voters went to the polls. Detroiters waited anxiously for the votes to be tabulated because they all knew intuitively that the outcome of this election could change Detroit forever. When the final votes were tallied, Coleman Young became Detroit's first black mayor, with 233,674 votes to John Nichols's 216,933.⁹³

The election of 1973 made it clear that Detroit, once a model city of the Great Society, had been split in half by the politics of race. Young won 90 percent of the black vote, and Nichols won 90 percent of the white vote.⁹⁴ As the *Detroit Free Press* pointed out, "vote returns indicated that the balloting . . . was along much sharper racial lines than the city's mayoral election four years ago."⁹⁵ As the *Detroit News* put it, "There can be little doubt, despite the care of both Nichols and Young in avoiding racist appeals for votes, that the 1973 Detroit Mayor's race was decided almost exclusively on racial grounds."⁹⁶

Significantly, Young had won by a very slim margin, which meant that almost half of the city was already extremely dubious of the new mayor. Even though Young was ultimately victorious because he put “together a coalition of blacks, unions, and white liberals,” the grim reality was that a significant portion of Detroit’s white population had backed Nichols and was vehemently against the city having a liberal—let alone a black liberal—mayor.⁹⁷ Ironically, just as the black radicals had been undone by their successes in pushing the legal system to its limits, white liberals similarly had been undone by their success in electing Young. White leaders lost political power to the black leaders within the liberal coalition of Detroit. The liberal agenda of these black leaders, while similar to that of the white leaders, placed far more emphasis on combating racial, as opposed to simply economic or social, inequality in the city.

As Young prepared to take office on January 6, 1973, he publicly issued “a warning to all dope pushers, rip-off artists and muggers [that] it’s time to leave Detroit. Hit the road! . . . I don’t give a damn if they’re black or white, if they wear super fly suits or blue suits with silver badges.”⁹⁸ Ironically, however, the city’s criminal element did not take Young’s victory as its cue to abandon the city, but the city’s white population did—at least those whites with the economic means to flee. For the whites financially unable to participate in the post-1973 exodus, “There remain[ed] a virulent racial bias that many believe [to be Young’s] biggest challenge.”⁹⁹ Coleman Young had, indeed, won the mayoralty, but his victory was qualified.

For Detroit blacks, who had fought so hard first inside, then outside, and finally back inside of the system, the city now held promise. For Detroit whites, however, the events of 1967 to 1973, culminating in the election of Young, sent them flying out of the city and into the Republican fold. These whites had fought as hard to maintain control of the city as blacks had to gain equality. Some of them had never supported the Democratic Party, but the majority of them—mostly blue-collar UAW members—had long been enthusiastic members of the party and the coalition on which it rested. Clearly, however, these same whites became increasingly uncomfortable with responding directly and actively to the needs of that coalition’s black members. With a black mayor leading the city, all now seemed lost. After

Nichols read his concession speech on the night of November 7, one of his campaign workers, who “sat stunned on a folding chair as hotel workers began clearing up debris and television crews collected cameras, lights, and equipment,” tearfully told reporters, “The city will go to hell now.”¹⁰⁰

Evidence from Detroit suggests that the ultimate exodus of whites from inner-city Detroit was, in fact, rooted in a complex social and political evolution that began after the Second Great Migration and culminated in the events that took place after 1967. It was the mass migration of southern African Americans to Detroit during and after WWII that injected the controversial issue of race into northern urban politics. And, as we have seen, it was diverging views of how the racial tensions in Detroit should be resolved or at least addressed that chipped away at the viability of liberal coalition politics over time.

The problem for Detroit, and ultimately for the politics of liberalism, was that despite gains made by both national and local civil rights leaders in the 1960s, and the greater black presence in coalition politics, racial discrimination in housing, education, employment, and law enforcement continued. Detroit’s blacks did not manufacture the existence of urban racism; rather, as the 1960s wore on, they refused to accept its glaring presence any longer. It was this that first caused a crisis of legitimacy within the city’s civil rights leadership and finally within liberal coalition politics as a whole. That the city was approaching a crisis became clear when poor Detroiters burned the city in 1967, but the crisis only deepened thereafter. It was after civil rights leaders had unsuccessfully attempted to share civic power and opportunity with whites and to eradicate racial discrimination in the city, after the rebellion of 1967, after black Detroiters attempted once again to resolve racial issues through the electoral process in 1969, and after the DPD’s refusal to reform its discriminatory ways that poor and working-class black Detroiters became militant and uncompromising.

The more insistent city blacks became that their opportunities should parallel those of whites and that the city’s police force should be monitored, the more convinced city whites became that urban blacks were demanding too much; that more, not less, police force should be exercised; and that whites must maintain control of the city.

The urban crisis wore on for years—from the early battles over segregated housing in the 1940s and 1950s to the later battles in the 1960s and early 1970s over the police, the schools, and the shop floors—as neither blacks nor whites were willing to concede the other's demands. And significantly, at the height of Detroit's crisis, the liberal agenda for the city was highly suspect to both whites *and* blacks.

A series of legal battles between 1969 and 1973 handed Detroit's liberal leaders the opportunity to address the issue of race directly and to show black Detroiters that their grievances could indeed get a fair hearing within the system. By seizing this opportunity, liberal leaders managed to renew city blacks' faith in the system. But the very events that encouraged blacks to once again work within the system, and that renewed their faith in the politics of liberalism, horrified whites, who began to turn away forever from the Democratic Party and all that they perceived it to stand for.

In 1973, following a highly contentious and racially polarized election, a black mayor took the helm in Detroit. His election finally ended the urban crisis that had gripped the Motor City since 1967. For the first time since the start of the Second Great Migration, black Detroiters felt that they had the chance for civic opportunity, social equality, and a real voice in the liberal coalition of which they had long been a part. After an almost thirty-year struggle, Detroit was a largely black city run by upper- and middle-class black Democrats and populated by increasingly impoverished working-class and poor blacks.¹⁰¹

Clearly, the cost of the black community's victory had been enormous. The irrevocable *political* loss that whites experienced in the election of 1973—not neighborhood desegregation, perceptions about crime, welfare dependency, or black militancy alone—finally sent them out of the city in droves and led them, enthusiastically, into the Republican fold. Certainly, some whites had fled the city years earlier in search of a “crabgrass frontier,” complete with spacious, segregated, and purportedly safe living.¹⁰² But a great many did not. Indeed, it was the determination of whites *not* to flee, but rather to fight, that had made Detroit such a war zone for so many decades. The whites who stayed in the city throughout the 1950s and 1960s to be sure had been critical of the Democratic Party for some time. They had regularly resisted an agenda of pushing for integration and ending dis-

crimination, and they had come to suspect, despite statistical evidence to the contrary, that liberal programs fueled crime and black dependency. But whites did not abandon liberalism or the inner city totally until they realized that blacks would now lead the liberal coalition and, thus, that the racial status quo was forever undone.

APPENDIX

TABLE A.1
Crimes Committed in Detroit: 1975-1979

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
Murder	607	662	478	498	451
Rape	1,425	1,230	1,277	1,288	1,369
Robbery	21,343	21,213	15,832	12,283	11,413
Assault	10,212	9,795	9,549	11,021	11,140
Burglary	46,261	44,647	35,742	32,574	32,701
Larceny	51,110	51,321	41,959	36,830	35,501
Auto theft	28,844	27,921	21,975	19,493	21,431
Total crime	199,027	195,474	160,710	146,576	146,455

SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

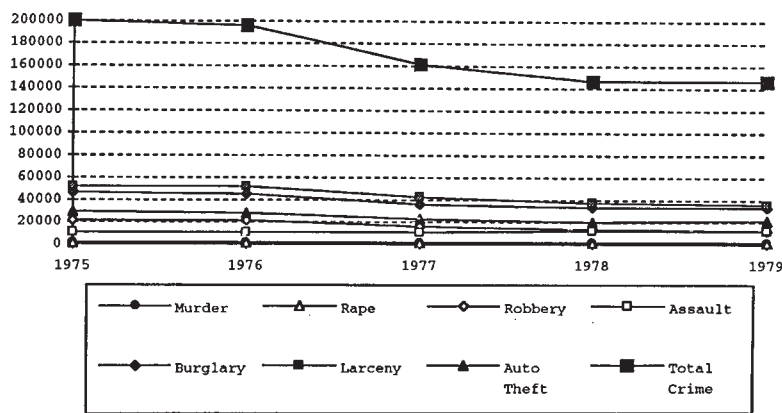


Figure A.1: Crimes Committed in Detroit: 1975-1979
SOURCE: "Total Crime and Prosecution Arrests—Twenty Five Year Comparison," The Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit.

NOTES

1. Z'ev Chafets, "The Tragedy of Detroit," *New York Times Magazine*, July 29, 1990, 23.
2. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Summary Characteristics for Government Units and Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas—Michigan*.
3. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Local Population Estimates, 1984*.
4. Chafets, "The Tragedy of Detroit," 22.
5. Bryan Thompson and Robert Sinclair, *Metropolitan Detroit: An Anatomy of Social Change* (Cambridge, 1977), 14.
6. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Summary Characteristics*.
7. Thompson and Sinclair, *Metropolitan Detroit*, 54.
8. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1989*, 109th ed.
9. Chafets, "The Tragedy of Detroit," 23.
10. Wilbur Rich, *Coleman Young and Detroit Politics: From Social Activist to Power Broker* (Detroit, 1989), 241.
11. Interestingly, crime in the city of Detroit actually decreased between 1975 and 1979 when whites fled the city en masse (see appendix). But by 1980, the crime rate did begin to escalate dramatically. The increase in the use and trafficking of the drug crack cocaine explains much of this post-1980 rise in crime. Prior to 1965, city drug use was largely confined to heroin. Heroin, while highly addictive, was a depressant, and its users tended to be passive addicts who generally withdrew from their surroundings. After 1980, however, a new drug of choice emerged in the city—crack cocaine. While equally if not more addictive than heroin, cocaine was a stimulant. Cocaine addicts (particularly those on crack cocaine) tended to be far more agitated and aggressive than users of virtually any other drug. According to Sergeant Michael Lemon of the DPD (who joined the force in 1972), with the introduction of crack cocaine use after 1980 came a noticeable rise in child abuse, domestic violence, gang violence, and illegal guns in the city. Not surprisingly, with addiction and gangs came a rising crime rate. One gang called Young Boys Incorporated, formed in 1979, took over the city's drug trade. With this highly organized gang came an increase in drug-related robberies, assaults, and homicides. Lemon is of the opinion that by 1980, 50 percent of the city's homicides were drug related. Michael Lemon, telephone conversation with author, May 4, 1994.
12. As quoted in Chafets, "The Tragedy of Detroit," 51.
13. Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York* (New York, 1990); Frederick Siegel, *Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1984); and Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1985). For a more recent, and exaggerated, articulation of this position, see Frederick Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here* (New York, 1997).
14. Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers*, 102.
15. Siegel, *Troubled Journey*, 203.
16. Rieder, *Canarsie*, 77-8.
17. Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers*, 92, 118-9.
18. Siegel, *Troubled Journey*, 265.
19. Siegel, *Troubled Journey*, 167.
20. Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers*, 102.
21. Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers*, 101.
22. Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers*, 90.

23. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (New Jersey, 1996).

24. Sugrue, *The Origins*, 267.

25. For one of many dramatic examples of this, see the detailed story of one Easby Wilson's move to all-white Riopelle street. Sugrue, *The Origins*, 231-3.

26. Sugrue, *The Origins*, 5, 245.

27. Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, 1983).

28. For more on these battles in the city's schools, workplaces, courtrooms, and vis-à-vis law enforcement, see Heather Ann Thompson, "The Politics of Labor, Race, and Liberalism in the Auto Plants and the Motor City, 1940-1980" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1995). Also see Heather Ann Thompson, *Motor City Breakdown: The Politics of Race and Liberalism on the Streets and Shopfloors of Postwar Detroit* (forthcoming).

29. Thompson, *Motor City Breakdown*.

30. For a great deal of interesting information on the African American migration from south to north, as well as many U.S. census statistics on migration, see Marcus E. Jones, *Black Migration in the United States with Emphasis on Selected Central Cities* (Saratoga, CA, 1980); *The Kerner Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1988 ed.), 12.

31. Jones, *The Kerner Report*, 12.

32. As Sugrue notes, "Residents of Detroit's white neighborhoods abandoned their ethnic affiliations and found a new identity in their whiteness." And, as testimony to this, he offers striking evidence of the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the whites who sought membership and participation in homeowners associations formed to combat the desegregation of their neighborhoods. See Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis*, 22, 211.

33. Some ethnic white Detroiters, particularly Jews and Poles, did not participate in the violent resistance to black mobility as actively as did other city whites. Indeed, in response to the ugly battles over integrating neighborhoods, in July 1968 the Detroit Archdiocese Priests Conference publicly advocated open housing. Stemming from this, in 1971, a "Black-Polish Conference" was established to further communication between these two groups. This Black-Polish Conference included 16 Board members, 225 members, as well as "4,000 interested persons," who subscribed to the belief that "Blacks and Poles share many problems and . . . by working together we can overcome these problems without losing our ethnic identities." From Donald I. Warren, "Black-Polish Conference Final Evaluation Report," May 5, 1973, The New Detroit Collection, Box 154, Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. Just as ethnic white support for integrated neighborhoods was extremely rare, so as was working-class activism across racial lines. One key exception to this was again Polish-African American unity, this time against the proposed razing of their integrated neighborhood, Poletown, to make way for a new General Motors complex during the late 1980s.

34. Arthur Kornhauser, *Detroit: As the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City* (Detroit, 1952), 69. This is an invaluable survey of 593 men and women, both black and white, between May and August 1951. The group chosen came from a mathematically based representative cross section of the Detroit population. The majority of interviewees were between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents were white, and 11 percent were black. White interviewers questioned white respondents, and black interviewers questioned black respondents. See the introduction and appendix for survey guidelines and controls.

35. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 75.

36. Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis*, 72.
37. Steve Babson, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town* (New York, 1984), 158.
38. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 62.
39. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 102.
40. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 33.
41. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 100.
42. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 21.
43. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 122.
44. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 122.
45. NAACP, Detroit Chapter, "White Police in Black Communities," in Wilma Hendrickson, *Detroit Perspectives: Crossroads and Turning Points* (Detroit, 1991), 451.
46. NAACP, "White Police," 452.
47. NAACP, "White Police," 456.
48. Kornhauser, *Detroit*, 176.
49. Cavanagh's electoral victory offers strong evidence of the ongoing struggle waged by both the black and the white communities to shape the postwar liberal agenda. As Sugrue in *Origins of Urban Crisis* points out of earlier decades in Detroit, "newly empowered Blacks and Whites in Detroit attempted to define and challenge—really to appropriate in their won terms—the New Deal State," 59.
50. "The American Crisis: A Liberal Looks at the Ashes of Dead Dreams and Issues a Manifesto for Survival," *The Detroit Free Press Magazine*, August 6, 1967. In The NAACP Collection, Part 1, Box 30, Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan.
51. B. J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence* (Chicago, 1972), 155.
52. "Project Head Start: Questions and Answer Fact Sheet," The NAACP Collection, Part 2, Box 26-1, Series 1.
53. See Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960's* (New York, 1984).
54. As Sugrue points out, numbers of middle-class blacks were able to move into relatively affluent neighborhoods such as Boston-Edison and Arden Park, but, as he also points out, "more than 80 percent of property in Detroit outside of the inner city (bounded by Grand Boulevard) fell under the scope of racial restrictions," making mobility exceedingly difficult. See Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis*, 44, 204.
55. Social Planning Division, Detroit Planning Commission, *Employment Conditions in the Model Neighborhood, 1970*, July 21, 1970, The City of Detroit City Planning Commission Collection, Box 14.
56. See *Detroit Model Neighborhood Household Survey*, April-June, 1972, The City of Detroit City Planning Commission Collection, Box 14.
57. Michael Lipsey and David Olson, *Commission Politics: The Processing of Racial Crisis in America* (New Jersey, 1977), 348.
58. City of Detroit—Total Action against Poverty Application for Funding from the Office of Economic Opportunity—Community Action Program, January, 1965, The NAACP Collection, Part 2, Box 27-7.
59. Charter Revision Commission, *Who's on Welfare?*, June 11, 1971, The Charter Revision Commission Collection, Box 3. In the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.
60. *Police Injury Cases*, Report, February 19, 1964, The Georgakas Collection, Box 3-1, Walter Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan.
61. Ray Girardin, Speech, *The Police and the Community*, January 17, 1964, The Girardin Collection, Box 10, The Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

62. The Detroit Police Department, *99th Annual Report: Statistical Annual Report for 1964*. In the Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit, Detroit, Michigan.
63. The Detroit Police Department, *102nd Annual Report*, 1967.
64. The Detroit Police Department, *110th Annual Report*, 1975.
65. The Detroit Police Department, *Annual Reports of 1964 and 1967*.
66. The Detroit Police Department, *Annual Report of 1965*.
67. The Detroit Police Department, *Annual Report of 1967*.
68. See Figure 2.
69. See "Major Crimes by Precinct," Detroit Police Department *Annual Report for 1955*. In the Detroit Police Department, Museum and Archives Unit. Detroit, Michigan.
70. City of Detroit, Total Action against Poverty Application to the OEO-CAP, January, 1965.
71. See report by Gebhard Long, William Deane Smith, David O. Porter, Delores Weber, and L. L. Loukopoulus, "Detroit Police Department—A Research Report on Previous Studies; Criminal Statistics; and Police Technology, Productivity, and Competence," May 1970. This exhaustive report includes seventy-four pages of text, sixty pages of graphs and tables, and a forty-three-page appendix. In the Kenneth Cockrel/Sheila Murphy Cockrell Collection, Box 37, The Walter Teuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit. Also see Loukopoulus, "The Detroit Police Department," and "The Detroit Police Department-Statistical Section," May 1970, an independent study conducted by the fact-finding team at Wayne State University and its Urban Studies Department, the Charter Revision Commission Collection, and at the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
72. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department," 43.
73. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department," 27.
74. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department," 8.
75. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department," 28.
76. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department," 3.
77. Long, et al., "Detroit Police Department."
78. Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis*, 188, 206.
79. Richard V. Marks, Memo for Commission Information and Action, The Georgakas Collection, Box 4-18.
80. Marks, Memo.
81. Leigins S. Moore, Letter to Rev. Charles Williams, February 19, 1965, The NAACP Collection, Part 2, Box 5-20.
82. Dr. Albert Wheeler, Speech, *The Negro Community and City Hall*, January 16, 1967, Delivered at the Michigan Civil Rights Commission Conference for Municipal Officials. In The NAACP Collection, Part 2, Box 19-21, Series 1.
83. Wheeler, *The Negro Community*, 3.
84. The Detroit Police Department, *Annual Reports of 1965 and 1971*.
85. *Detroit Free Press*, November 5, 1969.
86. Joseph Darden, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia, 1987), 209.
87. *Detroit Free Press*, November 5, 1969.
88. *Detroit Free Press*, November 5, 1969.
89. *Detroit News*, November 4, 1969.
90. *Detroit News*, November 4, 1969.
91. Space constraints prevent me from detailing these cases—New Bethel One and Two, the murder trial and subsequent workmen's compensation trial of black autoworker James Johnson, Jr., and then three trials involving a man accused of attempting to murder several STRESS

officers. But, in each of them, city whites knew, as did blacks, that liberal judges, hearing referees, and juries had afforded the defendants unprecedented leeway.

92. As Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh had put it to the Kerner Commission several years earlier, "We must frankly face up to the need to consider and accept a new principle . . . the principle of reparation for long standing injustice dating back to the generations preceding ours. . . . The price that they [blacks] have paid has been incalculable. Now the nation must, I believe, begin to make reparation—for the deeds of past generations, and of our own." See *Mayor's Recommendations before Governor Kerner's Committee in Washington on August 15, 1967*, The City of Detroit Planning Commission on Community Relations, Series 3, Box 2-19.

93. Detroit Election Commission, *Official Canvas of Votes 1953-1978*, The Vertical Files of the Sociology and Economics Department, The Detroit Public Library.

94. *The New York Times*, November 7, 1973.

95. *Detroit Free Press*, November 7, 1973.

96. *Detroit News*, November 11, 1973.

97. *The New York Times*, January 6, 1974.

98. *The New York Times*, January 6, 1974.

99. *The New York Times*, January 6, 1974.

100. *Detroit News*, November 7, 1973.

101. Scholars have made much of the notion that middle-class blacks were as eager to abandon decaying urban centers as their white counterparts were by the late 1970s. This did not happen in Detroit to any significant degree. While there was some black flight, the intense segregation that was maintained in the metro-area suburbs severely discouraged black mobility, and, thus, from 1973 to the present, there exists a noticeable, quite rigid, class structure in the Motor City. This phenomenon is best illustrated in Darden et al., *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. For more on the argument that the black middle class did flee from America's inner cities, see Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, 1991) and William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987).

102. Sugrue, *Origins of Urban Crisis*, 78, 149, 245, 266, and see Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of America* (New York, 1985).