Historic and Contemporary Segregation

The 2020 census data analyzed by the Othering and Belonging Institute (2020) has identified Detroit as the most segregated city in the United States and Detroit's metro area as the fourth most segregated metro area in the country. Like most northern cities, widespread segregation in Detroit began during the Great Migration. Beginning during World War I and continuing until deindustrialization in the late 1970s, the Great Migration saw an influx of Black people moving from the rural south to the industrializing north.

Detroit was one of the many industrializing northern cities that experienced a large increase in its Black population (Martin, 1993). When Black people arrived in Detroit, they encountered racial prejudice and violence from White people. They also joined an economy that was readily exploiting them through manipulative landlords and abusive employers. Widespread segregation between Black and White people within the city began immediately.

Detroit

Photo of the Ambassador International Bridge by Shottbydani from Pexels.com.

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Photo of the Cadillac Assembly Branch by Wikimedia Commons/Detroit Publishing Company from onlyinyourstate.com.

Throughout the great migration, Detroit was the headquarters of auto manufacturing in the United States. During World War I, immigration slowed down significantly which meant labor demand was at an all-time high. This led to thousands of newly arrived Black people joining the auto industry. The racial discrimination continued at the factory jobs with Black people being forced into the unskilled, lowest-paid positions with the worst working conditions (Martin, 1993, pp. 15-16).

They were also not allowed in some of the auto workers' unions which prevented them from organizing against the bosses for higher wages and better working conditions (Sugrue, 2005, p. 93). This same racial prejudice and economic exploitation kept Black people segregated not only in the field of employment but also within Detroit's neighborhoods. Racial covenants and real estate codes were some of the ways that racial discrimination manifested in keeping Black and White neighborhoods segregated even if a Black person or family had enough income to move into a different neighborhood (Martin, 1993, p. 25).

Deindustrialization

Thousands of Black and White people found employment and relative financial stability in the auto industry and other industrial jobs in the city. However, the 1950s were a turning point in Detroit's history, due to automation and most industry moving out of the city, Detroit lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs between 1947 and 1963. The economy suffered immensely from deindustrialization during this period, and it would never recover. The deindustrialization that brought Detroit to its knees also affected other cities that focused on industry like Pittsburgh, Chicago, Milwaukee, etc. (Sugrue, 2005, p. 13). However, those cities were able to reinvent themselves. They replaced heavy industry with other sectors that allowed the cities to maintain a somewhat reasonable level of employment and GDP. Detroit was not able to do this, as it was not able to keep its residents employed and financially stable.

This led to Detroit becoming an extreme example of urban collapse. In 1950, 1.8 million people lived in Detroit. However, over just 60 years Detroit lost 1.1 million residents and as of 2010, around 700 thousand people lived there (Kozllowski, 2021). This is a level of urban collapse that is completely unprecedented in U.S. history. The crisis that postwar Detroit experienced "emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality" (Sugrue, 2005, p. 5). Segregation between different Detroit neighborhoods is still prominent (Othering and Belonging Institute, 2020). However, since deindustrialization and White flight, segregation between the City of Detroit and the suburbs surrounding the city has become even more extreme since most of Detroit's White population has moved to the suburbs (Data USA, 2019).

Segregation Policies and Programs

Detroit's current mayor as of 2022, Mike Duggan, vowed to reverse Detroit's long history of segregation and destructive urban planning in a 2017 address. Duggan, who has been the city's mayor since 2014, plans to rebuild Detroit as a city for everyone. He promised to not support any renovation project that would result in displacing low-income residents and discussed how he is working to keep around 2,200 government-subsidized units that otherwise might become market-rate. Mayor Duggan also proposed that the city restrict tax incentives and other city assistance only to developments that put aside a minimum of 20% of their units for lower-income renters. Duggan blamed the federal government and its discriminatory policies for Detroit's post-war collapse and claimed that his administration is fighting to reverse the effects of those policies (Gallagher, 2017). While Mayor Duggan's speech sounded promising, three years after the speech Detroit is still the United States' most segregated city (Othering and Belonging Institute, 2020).

Mayor Mike Duggan, who was first elected In 2013 and reelected in 2017 and 2021. Photo from detroitmi.gov.

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