

RAGE, RIOTS, RUIN

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An aerial view of fires on the West Side of Chicago on April 5, 1968. (Cy Wolf / Chicago Tribune)

Northern migration

In the 1950s and 1960s, the West Side was a new frontier for blacks migrating from the South.

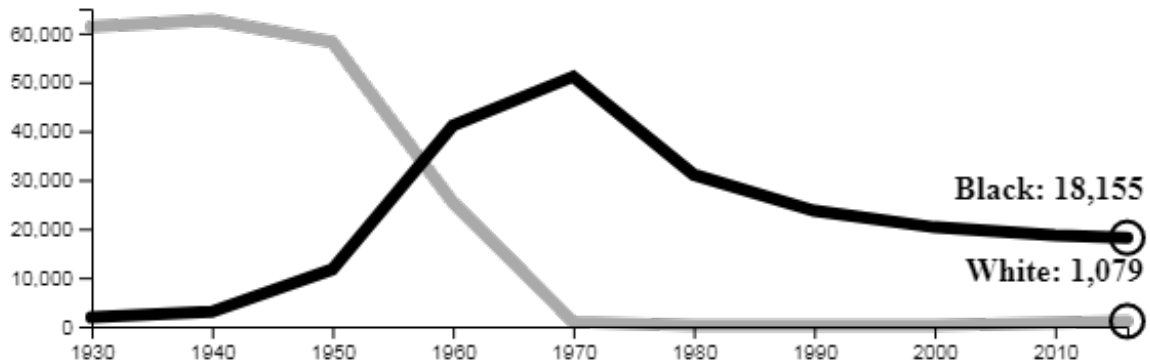
It was considered a vibrant area filled with jobs and opportunity. After all, it was home to Sears, Roebuck and Co. and Ryerson Steel. International Harvester was due south and General Electric was in nearby Cicero. Businesses were plentiful and prosperous, and retail arteries like Madison and Roosevelt fed a thriving economy.

It was like this when Johnson and her family moved into their Fifth City home in 1958. She said they had been the first black family in the neighborhood. As an 8-year-old girl, she walked to

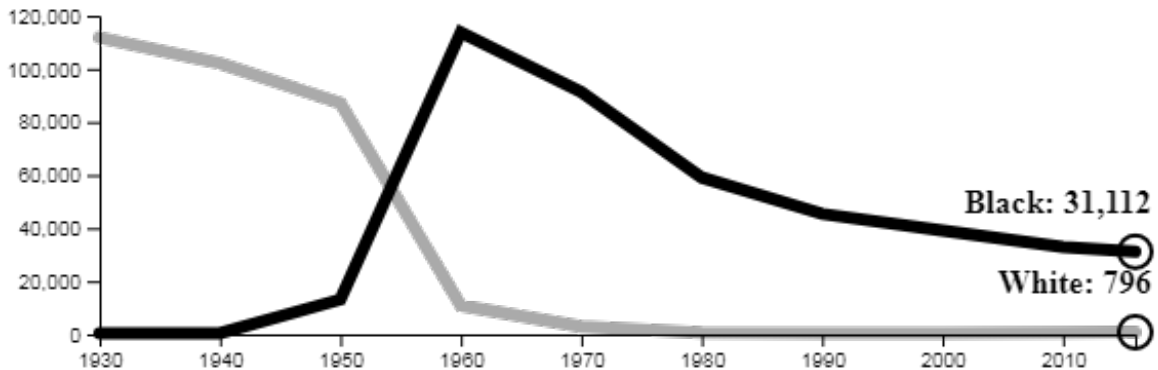
school with a white friend and the girl’s father, passing by the promenade of businesses on Fifth Avenue: the corner tavern, a cleaners, restaurants, grocery stores. The family of 13 finally had much-needed breathing room in the two-flat, where the kids slept in stacked bunk beds in the basement. The only vacant lot at the time, just next door, was an amenity — kids like Johnson played softball there.

Population by race

East Garfield Park



North Lawndale



Source: Analysis of Census data by [Rob Paral and Associates](#)

Incoming black residents, however, also had to contend with racism, even though white families were quickly leaving the area.

“Oh my God, they threw eggs at the door when we first moved here, they set garbage on fire, they wrote n----r on the glass door. They harassed us really good,” said Johnson, who turned activist in her youth, regularly joining marches and street protests with prominent civil rights leaders. “There was a lot of buildup. That’s why the movement was so powerful back then. We were realizing the things were being kept from us.”

One of those things was equal access to housing. To discourage black families from settling in an area, some selling homes would offer “contract” agreements, requiring prospective black buyers to put down lots of cash to buy a home on contract but without the equity assured by an

actual mortgage. The practice was a response to lenders' refusal to give mortgage loans in black communities.

"They couldn't outright get a mortgage," Johnson said, describing her parents' experience. "They gave them contracts. You had to pay so much on contract before you go to mortgage."

In East Garfield Park, the black population exploded from about 11,700 in 1950 to 41,100 in 1960. Meanwhile, the white population was headed in the other direction, even before the 1968 riots, dropping from 58,100 in 1950 to 25,400 in 1960. By 1970, there were only 885 white residents in the community.

"The numbers of white people who, within just a few years, said, 'I'm out of here' is just stunning," demographer Paral said. "That's a lot of people in 10 years, that's (roughly) 2,300 people every year."

Some white flight was brought on by prejudice from those who didn't want to live near African-Americans. Much of it was also enabled by the advent of the interstate highway system in the '50s and government programs that gave rise to suburbia.

"We started to subsidize the movement of middle-class people to the suburbs," Paral said. "That is a factor; you can't blame it all on the riots. White people were essentially being paid by their government to move to suburbs."

Many city services went with them, and housing conditions declined as more blacks were renting homes in Chicago.

In 1970, of the 240,000 housing units rented by black tenants, more than 5 percent lived without some or all plumbing, according to census figures. A significant portion lacked complete kitchen facilities.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, pose with neighborhood children in their new apartment at 1550 S. Hamlin Ave. in Chicago on Jan. 26, 1966. King and his family moved into the neighborhood to shed light on the living conditions of black people in Chicago in 1966. (Tom Kinahan / Chicago Tribune)

The struggle

In 1966, two years before he was felled by a sniper's bullet, King had taken his campaign for equality from Selma, Ala., to Chicago, saying the city "epitomizes all of the problems found in urban centers of the North."

King moved into a dingy, \$90-a-month apartment inside a three-story building at 1550 S. Hamlin Ave. in North Lawndale. There was no lock on the front door, and the entryway had dirt floors. A dim bulb lit the head of rickety stairs, and there was an overwhelming smell of urine.

Inside the two-bedroom unit, the family had no stove or refrigerator, and the tile floors were cracked.

King and his organization took over an apartment building at 1321 S. Homan Ave., encouraging its residents to use their monthly rent to rehabilitate the building. He marched in protest of housing segregation in the white enclave of Marquette Park on Chicago's Southwest Side. He also joined forces with a Chicago-based organizer named Jesse Jackson, whom he entrusted to lead programs aimed at spurring economic development in black communities.

"This is the first urban city that had that kind of progress," Jackson, 76, said, speaking recently from the headquarters of his Rainbow/PUSH organization on the South Side. "We changed the minds of what was possible in Chicago and gave a signal to urban America of what was possible. ... Much of the movement's gravitational center was in Chicago."

King's efforts endeared him to black communities in Chicago.



The Rev. Randall Harris is seen outside his church on Polk Street in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood on March 18, 2018. Harris recalls being on the streets of the city during the 1968 riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

"King really had a special place with us on the West Side," said Randall Harris, the Lawndale pastor. "We had a real relationship with him. It wasn't like we heard about him, we actually got a chance to hear him preach, touch him, those kinds of things. He went into the pool halls and the various institutions, and we were able to interact with him."

But life in North Lawndale also impacted King and his family, as he wrote in his last book:

“The crowded flat in which we lived was about to produce an emotional explosion in my own family. It was just too hot, too crowded, too devoid of creative forms of recreation. There was just not space enough in the neighborhood to run off the energy of childhood without running into busy, traffic-laden streets. And I understood anew the conditions which make of the ghetto an emotional pressure cooker.”

Similar conditions gave rise to rioting in Newark and Detroit in 1967.



Members of the presidential advisory panel on race riots, which became known as the Kerner Commission, meet at the Capitol on Feb. 28, 1968, and give final approval to the panel's report. From left are Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, chairman; New York Mayor John V. Lindsay, vice chairman; Sen. Fred Harris, D-Okla.; and Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP. (UPI Telephoto)

Fred Harris was one of 11 members of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, eventually known as the Kerner Commission, for its chairman, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner. After months of study, visits to former riot cities and hours of testimony from public figures including King, the commission issued a scathing report in March 1968 condemning “white racism” for creating, maintaining and condoning America’s ghettos.

It famously advised that America was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.” The findings were largely sensationalized by media and dismissed by government officials.

Weeks later, King traveled to Memphis, Tenn., with Jackson by his side to support a movement for sanitation workers. As King stood on a second-floor balcony at the Lorraine Motel, he was shot by escaped convict James Earl Ray, an Illinois native.

His assassination set off more than 100 riots across the U.S., including the most devastating civil disturbance in Chicago's history. It also generated uncertainty about the future of the civil rights movement.

"It was like, where do we go from here?" Jackson said. "We were not going to let one bullet stop a movement. He would not dare let us stop our work because he had been shot. It's like playing a big game and the team captain gets hurt. You don't forfeit the game. You have to get your nerves together and regroup."

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Jesse Jackson

King's death was gut-wrenching for West Siders like Johnson who looked at him as the movement's messiah. He joined an astonishing list of civil rights champions of the 1960s who were killed.

John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers and Malcolm X had already been killed by the time King was fatally shot. Robert F. Kennedy would be gunned down later that same year, and Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, would be fatally shot during a police raid the next.

Each passing eroded the community's faith that one day life in poor, black communities could improve. The deaths, some argue, left the civil rights movement without critical leadership, fragmenting it in a way many thought was irreparable.

"I think that a generation of people felt like they lost hope, that there was nobody to fight for them anymore," Johnson said.

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Repeating history

Fifty years after King's death, academics are once again examining what progress has been made since the Kerner Report. Recent rioting in cities such as Baltimore, Ferguson, Mo., and Milwaukee has brought renewed attention to the long simmering and unsolved problems of segregation, poverty and police violence.

"We've studied these problems to death," said Fred Harris. "It isn't for lack of knowing the facts and the causes of the troubles and the remedies for them — we know all that. We don't need

another (Kerner) commission to tell us what those facts are. Instead, what we need is a creation of will, enough will and political clout to get some of these things done.”

Today, the East Garfield Park and North Lawndale community areas are less populous, less diverse and poorer. The combined population is 55,660, 71 percent less than it was in 1960. Nearly 89 percent of residents are black, and around 43 percent live below the poverty line.

Living in poverty

Percentage of households with income below poverty line

East Garfield Park

North Lawndale

Source: Analysis of Census data by [Rob Paral and Associates](#)

On a recent chilly weekday afternoon, cars were parked on a grassy lot near Roosevelt and St. Louis Avenue. Nearby an overturned bucket, a milk crate and a weathered office chair created a makeshift living room for a few people drinking outdoors. Across the street, people walked across another littered lot where years of plodding feet had created a footpath.

A few blocks away, an older man remembered the stories of his mother, who enjoyed shopping in the business district.

“This used to be like downtown,” he said as he shuffled past a long-shuttered record store.

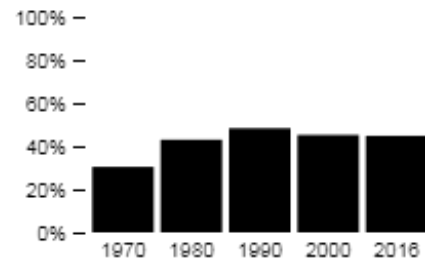
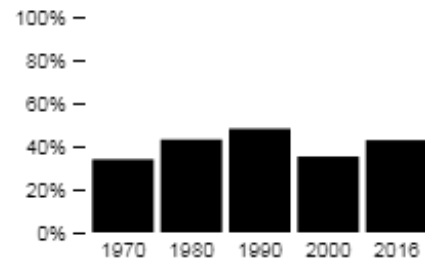
Roshonda Williams, a lifelong resident of North Lawndale, never had a chance to experience those days. Williams, 32, has only ever known a desolate and decayed Roosevelt Road. She barely acknowledged the trash-filled lots as she strode past them on a March afternoon.

“It’s been like this for as long as I’ve been growing up,” Williams said. “I always wondered why.”

She’s certain she wants better for her 6-year-old daughter. One day, she hopes they’ll be able to leave the blighted area for somewhere with more promise.

Stymied progress

Real estate companies have purchased swaths of land over the decades, but West Side residents say they believe these companies have no immediate intention of redeveloping the lots.



The city says it “aggressively” prosecutes owners of vacant buildings to protect communities from “criminal activity and blight associated with vacant and abandoned nuisance buildings.” Hundreds of properties citywide are currently under forfeiture and slated for demolition.

Once land becomes vacant, its owner is obligated to do little more than pay taxes and maintain it, which includes keeping it free of litter. But the penalties, ranging from \$300 to \$1,200 a day per offense, don’t appear to be much of a deterrent in communities rife with refuse.



An aerial view of West Madison Street near Fifth Avenue in Chicago on March 13, 2018. Madison Street was one of the main areas where rioting occurred during the 1968 riots. The area is still covered with vacant lots. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

The city also owns more than 1,700 parcels of vacant land in North Lawndale and East Garfield Park, according to the city Department of Planning and Development. In the Madison and Roosevelt corridors alone, the city says it owns approximately 110 parcels of vacant land.

In recent years, a city program gave community members and nonprofits the opportunity to buy multiple parcels of vacant lots for \$1. A University of Illinois study shows residents generally handle the upkeep. But most don’t have the means to revitalize the land, outside of community gardens or side yards.

“There is no question there are formerly prominent commercial corridors in the city that have faced generations of disinvestment and decline,” said Grant Klinzman, a spokesman for the mayor. “While there is unfortunately no magic solution that will immediately bring the corridors to their full potential, the Emanuel administration is working hard and creatively to get the job done and reverse the trend of decades of disinvestment.”

City programs also offer financial aid and grants to businesses in depressed areas.



U.S. Rep. Danny Davis talks about his recollections of the 1968 riots on the West Side of Chicago from his office on the 2800 block of Fifth Avenue on March 12, 2018. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

U.S. Rep. Danny Davis opened his offices in the 2800 block of Fifth Avenue “to be at the center of need.”

Davis said he and other federal lawmakers have tried to find solutions, but he had no simple answer for the lack of progress. Over the years, millions in federal funding has been secured for business investments and job creation.

Yet, rebuilding has overwhelmingly failed along Madison and Roosevelt.

Some development has been stymied by landowners who set lofty prices that developers aren’t willing to pay, Davis said. For that reason, more investment is needed from all quarters of government to impel business owners to build west of Western Avenue, he said.

Even when millions of dollars in public money were allocated, blighted West Side communities were still left with close to nothing. Perhaps the most memorable example of this occurred during the late-1970s to mid-1980s, when Pyramidwest Development Corp. received \$22 million in federal funds for a slew of projects intended to revitalize the West Side, including a couple of blocks of burned-out land near Kedzie Avenue and Roosevelt.

After more than a decade, townhouses and senior housing were built at that intersection. But no economic redevelopment was generated beyond a bank. The land intended to be a shopping plaza was later surrendered to its previous owners after Pyramidwest failed to keep up with property taxes.

The city is heralding a \$32.4-million food incubator in East Garfield Park as the next large-scale project that could spur a West Side renaissance. A 67,000-square-foot complex known as “The Hatchery” is expected to feature 56 food-grade kitchens, dry-cold storage, loading docks, and meeting and office spaces aimed at cultivating local food startups on the southeast corner of Lake Street and Kedzie.

If everything goes as planned, the facility could open by the end of the year. History, residents say, is not on the project’s side.

Though progress is stalled, many don’t have a choice but to stay; others remain out of defiance.

“In almost any poverty-stricken area, you find a lot of young people who can’t get a house at that moment,” said Davis, an Austin resident. “You find a lot of old people who can’t start anew someplace else, and they can’t just get another mortgage and decide to rebuild their entire existence.

“The others have kind of dug in,” he said. “They are people you find on almost every block who said, ‘This is where I am. This is my home.’ ”

Returning home

Betty Johnson’s house was still standing after the fires and riots subsided, and her family continued to live there despite the neighborhood ruin. She went to college and moved away for many years. But in 1986, Johnson decided to move back home.

When she returned, the neighborhood was even more empty than when she had left, and it had become a hotbed for crime.



Betty Johnson stands near a vacant lot at Fifth and Central Park avenues in Chicago on March 18, 2018. When Johnson was 16, the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and the subsequent riots came to her family's doorstep. Her neighborhood was devastated by fire and remains scarred by vacant lots to this day. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

Standing in a vacant lot behind her two-flat recently, Johnson, now 66, fondly recalled the days before the riots, a time when she could visit restaurants on Madison Street during her lunch period at Marshall High School, when her family had a choice of three grocery stores within a mile and when a teenager could easily find a job in her own community.

These days, ordinary tasks become an expedition. To grocery shop or visit her bank, Johnson travels at least a mile away.

Johnson said strangers regularly gather on nearby vacant lots to drink. Police chases sometimes send people darting past her house.

In April 2017, six men in their 20s were shot on her block, two of whom were killed. Johnson had seen the altercation and a man running with a gun before heading to the grocery store. She returned to find a bullet hole in her window.

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“None of those people lived over here, but they came over here every day like they were going to work,” she said.

Johnson and her neighbors formed a block club to draft solutions. They regularly called police, attended beat meetings and, in return, they were met with retaliatory gunfire that shattered the windows of their homes and cars.

Eventually, they fenced off lots whether they owned them or not, which put an end to some loitering and unwanted foot traffic. They requested permit parking, lobbied for speed bumps and are negotiating to convert the street to one-way.

People often ask Johnson why she stays. She tells them that she initially couldn't see a life for herself here, and she doesn't blame people like her son who don't want to return. But reflecting on what her parents had to endure to buy their home — the redlining, the harassment and financial exploitation — she realized what it meant to own it.

Since that time, the woman who once challenged inequality with the likes of King, teacher-turned-activist Al Raby and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson has staged a silent protest in her own backyard.

“You're not going to run over me, and you're not going to run me out of here.”

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