Boston Riots

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Boston was a relatively serene, if undistinguished, city from 1920 until the late 1960s. Along with the state, it suffered from cycles of prosperity, decline, and renewed prosperity because of its traumatic changeover from an industrial to a high-tech and service economy after World War II. While violence was no stranger to the city, particularly during the hard times of the Great Depression, no communal rioting occurred. Except for minor outbreaks, such as the long-shoremen’s strike of 1931, or the sporadic attacks upon Jews by Irish gangs in 1943, Boston experienced no major riots until the late 1960s. The ghetto rioting of the 1960s raged all across urban America, and Boston’s disaffected blacks were no exception. In 1967/68 black plebeians resorted to violence to protest their powerlessness and subordinate economic standing.

This interpretation in no way condones the violence perpetrated, but wishes to explain the circumstances of these riots in the context of the times and the history of Boston. The fact that people resort to violence as a last-ditch
means of expression does not exonerate them from the consequences of their unlawful acts. This survey of Boston's riots over the years, however, hopefully explains why people choose direct action at a particular moment in their lives.

The ghetto riots in the 1960s were symptomatic of the problems plaguing urban America. The vast suburbanization of the nation and the rise of federal largesse in the form of urban renewal and highway building monies transformed the cities. Suburbanization took jobs, taxes, and housing opportunities away from the central city. Poor working-class communities of whites, unable to flee to the suburbs, lived in rundown neighborhoods. A growing in-migration of southern blacks generated central-city ghettos. These decaying neighborhoods abutted revived central business districts, which became showplaces for elites and suburban visitors. Boston was no exception.

Black Migration to Boston

Blacks made the long and arduous journey to Boston in the same search for jobs and equality of opportunity as did the other migrants to the city. From 1870 to 1940, blacks averaged only 1.4 to 3.1 percent of Boston's population. Persistent racial bias led to job discrimination, residential segregation, unequal schooling, and a constant struggle against social prejudice. In 1900, for example, blacks made up 2 percent of Boston's labor force, but 77 percent of these black males held menial labor positions, including bootblack, coachman, cook, domestic servant, gardener, janitor, messenger, newsboy, porter, packer, steward, and general laborer. In comparison, only 36 percent of Irish workers held menial labor jobs. Aside from a tiny black middle class, a life of menial labor and residential transience was the lot of blacks from the turn of the century to World War II. One historian summed up this tale of African Americans denied equal opportunity: "Black economic progress did not fit the model of even the most limited example of nineteenth-century immigrant advance, that of Irish Bostonians." Another scholar stated, "There was virtually no improvement in the occupational position of black men in Boston between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of World War II."1

The migration of large numbers of blacks began in earnest only after 1950, with Boston's black population increasing from 5 percent to 16 percent by 1970. Throughout this period, despite ongoing discrimination, blacks made occupational gains into semiskilled and skilled manual labor jobs, and into white-collar
clerical jobs. These job improvements do not tell the whole tale. Blacks were getting better jobs, but their income levels in comparison to whites actually fell. As one historian wrote:

Despite these undeniable gains, however, the occupational distribution of Negro males in Boston remained quite distinctive in 1970. Seven of ten black men, but slightly less than half of the white males of the city, were manual workmen of some kind. As compared with the entire Boston labor force, there was a black excess of 59 percent among unskilled laborers, 81 percent among service workers, and 77 percent among semiskilled operatives. And there was a corresponding black deficit of 44 percent among professionals and 60 percent among managerial and sales personnel. . . . In 1970 as in 1950 Negro males in Boston earned less than three-quarters of what their white counterparts earned.²

Besides income deprivation from menial labor positions, blacks, along with poor whites, found their housing conditions worsened under the impact of urban renewal.

Urban Renewal

In the 1950s and 1960s, publicly funded construction of major downtown commercial projects through urban renewal revitalized the Hub's economy. The massive demolition of an entire neighborhood, the West End; the conversion of the seedy downtown Scollay Square area into a new government center; and the rehabilitation of the South End, the waterfront, the Fenway, and Charlestown were among the many areas that urban renewal transfigured in the city. Renewal affected over 3,223 acres and more than 50 percent of Boston's population. By the early 1970s, the city had the fourth-largest central-business-district office space in the country, and the highest construction rates.

While the business community profited and renewal areas became attractive residential neighborhoods, urban renewal had staggeringly negative effects upon the poor working classes and their communities. Urban renewal eliminated whole neighborhoods like the West End, and tore apart neighborhoods like Charlestown. In 1966 a Boston Globe survey showed dissatisfaction with urban renewal across the board. Articles titled "Southie—Decay is Setting In,"
"Depopulation of Dorchester," "Mess in Eastie," "Charlestown Showing Age," and "Blighted Areas Scar Mark of New Boston" told a tale of the harmful affects of renewal and its unpopularity with the public. The city actually lost more dwelling units than it gained during the 1960s. City council member Joseph Lee condemned the destruction of his beloved West End and the impact of renewal on the powerless: "The entire concept is based on the Sermon on the Mount in reverse. Blasted be the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of nothing. Blasted be they that mourn, for they shall be discomforted. Blasted be the meek, for they shall be kicked off the earth." While some neighborhoods became gentrified, others saw their parks, schools, and playgrounds neglected. At the same time, urban renewal drew high technology and service-oriented jobs to the city, while blue-collar jobs declined. Urban renewal hurt the poor, and they knew it.

Urban renewal, sometimes called "black removal," intensified the concentration of blacks in some areas, thus increasing racial segregation and poverty. The growing presence of poor blacks in Boston was to generate new problems that would lead to racial conflicts and direct action. Urban renewal razed working-class neighborhoods, forcing poor blacks and whites to areas with higher rents. Discrimination by realtors and white animosity toward blacks resulted in segregated areas. For example, in the black South End, urban renewal demolished wooden tenements inhabited by blacks in order to build or renovate brick townhouses for the upper middle class. The loss of cheap rentals pushed poor blacks into north Dorchester, creating a black ghetto. Similarly, when Yankee bankers and federal officials sought to promote black homeownership through urban renewal monies, they redlined the old Jewish community of Mattapan. This meant that blacks could get mortgages only in that community. This gave an opportunity to realtors and block busters, who used unscrupulous methods to force Jews to sell out, but in Mattapan only, and nowhere else in the city. Blacks bought homes with high mortgages, which most were unable to pay. Foreclosures became rampant, and the community decayed into slum tenements for black renters only.

A prime example of community decline due to urban renewal was the South End. Black political activist Mel King grew up in the South End and watched its demise:

The history of Boston's South End, the neighborhood where I grew up, is representative of the plight of most inner-city ethnic neighborhoods.
Since the 1950s, blacks in Boston, as in other major cities in the nation, have had to struggle for space against the massive government- and business-sponsored campaigns for "urban renewal," which ultimately robbed our neighborhoods of their history and identity. . . . the Master Plan for Boston [urban renewal] had begun its job of forcing black people out of the South End into Roxbury and Dorchester in order to accommodate the commercial and residential needs of Boston's banks, insurance companies and, of course, MIT and Harvard. This housing segregation went hand in hand with the gerrymandering of the black population in such a way as to assure that they had no political voice. This systematic denial of jobs, housing, education and political representation by the Boston power structure came to full development in the creation of the "ghetto," for the image of the ghetto allowed the ruling elite to blame the black community for what they had systematically imposed upon us.\textsuperscript{6}

Thus urban renewal increased the ghettoization of blacks in Boston.

Unlike blacks in Detroit or Atlanta, cities that experienced long-term and continuous heavy black migrations, Boston's blacks could not achieve significant political power because of their fewer numbers. Lacking a substantial middle class, competing for jobs with other ethnic groups in a city with few unskilled labor opportunities, and facing a white power structure that resorted to racism to win elections, Boston's blacks found themselves powerless. Although their numbers were small in comparison to whites, the African American population increased rapidly in the postwar years. From 3.1 percent of the population in 1940, their numbers rose to 5 percent in 1950, 9.1 percent in 1960, and 16.3 percent (104,500) by 1970. They lived in ghettos in a fashion almost comparable to the largest of American cities. By 1976, two years after court-mandated integration of the public schools, two geographers stated with conviction that "blacks are more segregated in Boston than in most other large metropolitan areas."\textsuperscript{7}

From 1910 to 1970, besides Yankee Protestants, the four prominent ethnic groups in Boston were the Irish, Italians, British Canadians, and Eastern European Jews. While portions of these groups experienced sufficient social mobility to move to the suburbs, others remained behind in Boston's older immigrant neighborhoods. Ethnic segregation and restricted economic opportunities built up a fortress mentality among the Irish, the Italians, and the few remaining
Jews. Boston's black population had resided in confined areas of Beacon Hill and the South End for decades, but by the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s they moved steadily into decaying Jewish neighborhoods in Roxbury as the former occupants joined the suburban exodus. As Boston's blacks began to seek housing in the affordable and stable Irish and Italian neighborhoods, characterized by strong ethnic identities, they threatened the social fabric of these parochial "tribal domains."

Boston's working-class whites reacted in panic to growing numbers of black migrants. Whites feared that these newcomers would take their jobs, force down property values, bring crime to the streets, increase welfare rolls, and lower the standards of their neighborhood schools. The objections put forth by the Irish and Lithuanians in South Boston and Charlestown, the Italians in East Boston and the North End, and the Jews in Mattapan and Roxbury were the very ones heaped upon them by the Yankees generations earlier. Seeking a scapegoat to explain their economic decline and the incessant challenge to their neighborhood turf, Boston's white ethnics turned their discontent into hatred of the city's newest immigrant group. All classes in the city exhibited this racial hostility, including those who controlled politics, finances, and jobs. The result was that the city's newcomers lacked the few job opportunities available for white working classes, particularly in employment at city agencies and the many unskilled labor positions generated from construction contracts awarded through political favoritism. Discrimination and denial of economic opportunity was a scene played out not only in Boston, but among all the larger urban areas of the nation.

**Black Inequality**

The civil rights movement in the 1950s was a product of the rising tide of black unrest at their exclusion from the material benefits of American society. Successful legal advances largely benefitted middle-class blacks, and inner city blacks demonstrated their frustration and anger at their subordinate economic and social position with direct action. Urban riots began in 1963, and reached a peak year in 1967, with outbursts nationwide in over sixty cities. These riots illustrated the ill effects of ghetto life. Because of racial discrimination, blacks lived isolated from the white community in the poorest areas of cities, lacking in jobs, decent schools, or normal opportunities for advancement. The blacks
who participated in the resulting riots protested the conditions of ghetto life, attempted to redress grievances, expressed the need for respectful treatment, and signaled those in power that they would no longer accept their exclusion from American prosperity. As was the case with plebeians before them, powerlessness was the reason blacks resorted to violence. One observer wrote:

Taken together, the riots were the actions of a people, poor and dispossessed and crushed in huge numbers into large slum ghettos, who rose up in wrath against a society committed to democratic ideals. Their outburst was an expression of class antagonism, resentment against racial prejudice, anger at the unreachable affluence around them, and frustration at their sociopolitical powerlessness.

In 1967 the blacks of Boston took up the cause of communal social violence. Competing for unskilled jobs with other ethnic groups favored by the ruling political machine, lacking sufficient numbers to wield political power through voting, ignored and discriminated against by the business and educational community, Boston's blacks found themselves powerless.

The administration of Mayor John Collins (1960–1967) focused upon revival of the downtown business district, increasing business investment, and the rehabilitation of neighborhoods to woo the middle and upper class back to the city. Like many other mayors of the time, Collins ignored the plight of the newcomer blacks and the issues that confronted them in one of the nation's most racist northern cities. Collins worked closely with the business community. He was an unofficial member of a group called the Coordinating Committee, or the “Vault,” because they first met in a boardroom near the vault of the Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company. The president of Boston Safe Deposit and Trust, Ralph Lowell, made a note in his diaries about a “gloomy” Vault meeting with the mayor about the “Negro problem” as early as 1963: “The Mayor joined us a little late and we discussed the colored problem. The negroes [sic] are determined to have equality ‘Now,’ despite the fact that comparatively few of them are qualified for the better jobs.” Even with the explosion of rioting that began in other cities in 1963 and occurred every summer thereafter, in 1967 the Collins administration still had no plans in place to deal with black discontent.

As early as 1965, two sociologists studying ghetto riots warned communities that “when grievances are not resolved, or cannot be resolved under the existing
arrangements," riots will occur. In comparing sixty-six cities where riots developed, with the same number of similar cities that had no riots, they found that riots took place because community institutions were “malfuctioning.” They noted that cities that had blacks in goodly numbers on the police force had no rioting. Moreover, they pointed out that cities with at-large elections of city councilors and school committee members were riot prone. Cities with the more representative district or ward elections were less likely to have riots.10

In the 1960s Boston had at-large elections, with no black politicians on either the city council or the school committee. Blacks held few positions in the police department or any major city agencies. Even after riots in 1967 and 1968, less than 3 percent of the Boston police force were minorities in 1970. While Collins and his staff could be excused for not knowing about the contents of a sociological journal, they were aware that blacks had no significant representation in the city and that riots were occurring all over the nation. Their failure to take any notice of their own local situation resulted in the eruption of violence in Boston’s black ghetto. The explosive issues that caused the four days of mayhem were a sense of powerlessness and police brutality.

The 1967 Ghetto Riots

The circumstances that led to the riots revolved around the attempts of the poor to express their grievances with the legal system. An organized group of welfare mothers, black and white, staged a sit-in demonstration in a welfare center located in the Roxbury ghetto. They wanted to force welfare officials to listen to what the welfare mothers perceived were legitimate demands. The obdurate mayor instead ordered the police to expel them. The obvious brutality used by the police against the women infuriated onlookers, and they attacked the police. Assaults upon the police then escalated into four days of rioting and looting.

Frustrated by the red tape and bureaucracy of the welfare system, and by their lack of success in communicating with welfare officials, the mothers organized a lobbying group, Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) in the spring of 1965. Taking up the tactics of the civil rights movement, on April 26, 1965, MAW organized a sit-in at the Welfare Department Office on Hawkins Street to complain about the failure of the department to distribute surplus foods. They left after two hours, when officials promised to make more timely food
distributions. Eventually, six surplus food distribution centers opened, justifying the mothers’ strategy of confrontation. In July 1966 they marched on the statehouse, and cornered the governor in an elevator. They demanded increases in rental allowances, more leeway in earning money that they could keep and still receive welfare, easing of welfare red tape, and a greater voice in setting welfare policy. Ignored, they staged an all-night sit-in at the Blue Hill Avenue welfare center on May 26, 1967. Still, their grievances went unheeded.

The focus of MAW’s anger, however, was the Grove Hall welfare office, also in Roxbury, where recipients had to wait long hours before seeing a caseworker. The Grove Hall center was notorious for its lack of staff, inefficiency, and generally derelict attention to the needs of clients. One of the center’s social workers verified these conditions in an interview with a Boston newspaper: “Conditions here are terrible for us and worse for the clients. We’re overcrowded, understaffed, case loads are high, budgets inadequate, and social workers are bogged down with paperwork, releases, and forms to fill out. I can really understand the gripes of the Mothers.”

On Friday, June 2, 1967, in late afternoon, MAW arrived at the center with a delegation of twenty-five black and white welfare mothers and a small contingent of college students. They brought with them a list of demands printed on mimeograph sheets, and expressed their refusal to remain powerless. “We’re here,” they said, “because we’re sick and tired of the way the Welfare Dept.—and especially Grove Hall—treats us. We’re tired of being treated like criminals, of having to depend on suspicious and insulting social workers and of being completely at the mercy of a department we have no control over.” They presented a long list of demands and then, at 4:20 P.M., they chained the doors shut from the inside, preventing fifty-eight welfare workers from leaving the building.

Their demands expressed their sense of exclusion from the legal system and their desperate need to have some control over their own destiny and the lives of their children. Their ten stipulated grievances all pointed to their sense of powerlessness:

1. Welfare benefits will not be lost as a result of rumor or hearsay; there should be a chance to defend oneself from charges.
2. Police will be removed from welfare centers as they are a “threatening presence.”
3. Welfare workers should be available to talk to mothers every day and not just once a week.
4. Welfare workers will treat clients with respect as “human beings.”
5. Every welfare office will designate a board of clients to aid in dealing with emergency situations.
6. “Welfare mothers must be appointed on all policy-making boards of welfare.” To help children get off the dole, welfare mothers can save money from small jobs to pay for children’s education.
7. Mothers should be able to earn $85 a month without penalty, and also be able to keep 70 percent of what they earn over that sum.
8. The city should initiate a public relations campaign to change the negative image of welfare recipients.
9. Boston welfare commissioner Daniel I. Cronin should be dismissed.
10. MAW should have input in the appointment of a replacement.\(^\text{13}\)

Following the precepts of civil disobedience, they waited for the authorities to arrive to negotiate their demands.

At 4:45 p.m. a fire engine and the police appeared. A crowd gathered outside. A few minutes later, police reported that they received a call from inside the center that an elderly welfare worker had a heart attack. Mayor John Collins ordered the police in to get her out and empty the building. The mayor called the demonstration “the worst manifestation of disrespect for the rights of others that this city has ever seen.”\(^\text{14}\) When the police attempted to break through the locked doors, they clashed with bystanders who tried to prevent access to the building. By 5:30 police, using fire ladders, climbed through a rear window, gaining entry into the building. Youths shouted, “block the ladder.” Minutes later a woman appeared at a window screaming that the police were beating people with nightsticks. At the front of the building, police broke through the doors and charged in. They removed the sick woman and began escorting welfare workers out of windows and down ladders. As police carried out two women demonstrators, they called for help. A reporter described what happened next: “Police dragged a dozen or so of the male demonstrators from the scene and threw them into patrol wagons. By this time small stones and bottles were whistling through the air.” One youth taunted police, “Wait till tonight baby. Just wait till tonight. Then you’ll see a real burn.”\(^\text{15}\)

The next day, in a press conference, MAW leaders gave their account of
the events, accusing the police of excessive use of force. They testified that a
deputy superintendent said, “get them, beat them, use clubs if you have to, but
get them out of here.” One mother described being “beaten, kicked, dragged,
abused, insulted and brutalized” by police who used “vulgar language” and re-
peated the word “nigger.” Policemen reportedly threw a seventeen-year-old
male through the glass of an office door. Police told another version. Deputy
Superintendent William A. Bradley said, “The demonstrators refused to
move. . . . As officers tried to break in, they were kicked, beaten, thrown to the
floor and cut with glass.” One police veteran denied claims of police brutality,
but stated, “Sure we made some mistakes Friday night. I wish they had never
happened.” Whatever the truth, the gathering crowd outside believed that the
police used excessive force, and they attacked the police in earnest.

After several skirmishes with the crowd, the police successfully emptied the
building by 8:10 p.m. The crowd moved from Grove Hall to nearby streets, and
a full-scale riot ensued. Hundreds of youths smashed windows, pulled fire
alarms, and pelted firemen and police with rocks and debris. Vandalism, arson,
and looting began. “Clothing from Ladd’s Cleaning at 331 Blue Hill ave. [sic]
was torn from racks. Some was [sic] stolen, while many skirts, dresses and coats
were burned.” As in the past, plebeian rioters destroyed goods as often as they
looted. The fire department arrived after rioters had set fire to Cohen’s furniture
store. Deputy Fire Chief Joseph Kidduff described the affray: “When we first
got here it was bad. They were robbing and looting all over the place. It was
definitely arson.” Crowds ranted at the firemen, “Get the white trash.”

Authorities called in seventeen hundred police to cope with the wide-ranging vio-

The rioting took place over fifteen blocks of Blue Hill Avenue, the main
thoroughfare in the Roxbury ghetto. “Windows were smashed and merchandise
hurled to the street where screaming teenagers picked it up and fled.” The
crowd was in a “frenzy” that lasted for twelve hours. A reporter heard a youth
shout that the word was out to “Burn Roxbury.” He went on to note, “Grove
Hall resembled a war-scarred battleground. Streets were littered with rocks, tin
 cans and tonic bottles. Store windows were smashed, auto windows shattered
and burglar alarms screamed. It was a continuous series of outbreaks that ruled
the area throughout the evening, with the rioters starting fires, looting stores
and stoning the officers and firemen.” At one point police fired eighty to one
hundred rounds of pistol shots over the heads of rioters to disperse them. Most
incidents ended by 4:30 A.M. Fire destroyed two buildings, with damage estimated at $50,000. Police arrested forty-four, and the injured numbered forty-five.

During the melee black community leaders claimed the police started the violence by their extreme use of force. Thomas Atkins, vice-chair of the Boston chapter of the NAACP, charged police clubbed him for merely standing on the steps of a building on Blue Hill Avenue, and then arrested him. Bryon Rushing, field director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, found himself arrested twice that evening. Police charged Rushing the first time for “participating in an affray,” and after his release, rearrested him for “disturbing the peace.” In Roxbury District Court he denounced these actions. “The police started it,” Rushing claimed. “It will be documented and set forth.” Reverend Virgil Wood, a civil rights leader, said, “War was declared on black people by the police force. . . . In all likelihood this will happen again unless the whole attitude of this administration changes.” The president of Boston’s NAACP, Kenneth Gustcott, declared, “I saw the city on the verge of being cut in two, as other cities such as Los Angeles and New York. We must be honest enough and courageous enough to admit that threat has not ended.  

Rioting began anew on the next night.

To prevent the renewal of violence, on Saturday the mayor ordered the police to close all the bars and liquor stores on Blue Hill Avenue. This order and the presence of many police inflamed roving bands of youths. By 10:30 in the evening the tension started up again with false fire alarms. “Constant false alarms kept the area shrieking with the sounds of sirens and crowds of residents began building up in several sectors of the area, with police on the receiving end of repeated taunts.” On this warm night thousands of Roxbury residents walked the streets. Spasmodic violence broke out as roving gangs picked out targets. There was no evidence of planning or organization in the series of spontaneous outbursts that occurred. A police spokesperson commented, “There is no basis at this time to reports of planned action by the rioters.” On the street one onlooker called it a “war,” blaming the police’s posture. Answering a fire alarm, firefighters found themselves the target of a sniper’s bullets. One fireman reported, “When we got off the fire truck, we were bombarded with bottles, and I heard 10 shots. Then I saw Joe [Lt. Joseph Donovan] go down.” Shot in the hand, Donovan later recovered. The police seemed inept in their handling of the riot, but Deputy Police Superintendent Bradley’s summary of the events
blamed the community: “The police had control of the situation, but lack of cooperation from the citizens prevented peace from returning.” Scattered outbursts continued throughout the evening, petering out in the early morning hours.

On the next night, Sunday, June 4, more serious violence followed in the early evening. The Boston Globe of June 5 reported it was “a night of gunshots, looting and violence,” with police “pinned down by sniper fire in the Grove Hall area.” Rioters threw bricks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails from rooftops and doorways; they overturned and set fire to cars, and continued window smashing and looting. Blue-helmeted riot police raided buildings looking for rock throwers. The Boston Record American of June 5 reported “new assaults by rock hurling gangs, minor fires and looting.” The paper labeled the rioters as “an irresponsible element, estimated by police to be hardly more than one percent” of the city’s black population. Nonetheless, authorities called in 1,900 policemen to quell these disturbances by midnight. Superintendent Bradley again appraised the situation in a curious fashion, ignoring the major issue behind the rioting. He blamed the trouble on “irresponsible people, young punks and teenage hoodlums, taking advantage of the situation. It would not be fair to call this a race riot.”

The night’s mayhem resulted in eleven arrests and eleven injuries.

On Monday, June 5, the violence began to subside, with “sporadic outbursts” as “bands of youths roamed the streets, stoning passing cars and heckling the law.” A small band of rioters smashed a police car windshield, which injured an officer. Missiles thrown at a Globe photographer and reporter resulted in minor injuries. Youths threw Molotov cocktails. A man suffered serious wounds when he picked up a package that turned out to be a bomb, which exploded in his hands. The next night the only remaining signs of the riot were the sixty false fire alarms that occurred.

The mayor and the police ascribed the violence to criminal elements and not to racial conditions. One newspaper, the Boston Herald, hinted that it was Communist inspired. But the plebeians of Roxbury had their own version of the riot’s cause, as reported in a series of interviews published in the Boston Globe. One twenty-five-year-old man declared, “People were finally getting to express their personal opinions ... their personal feelings. Other times nobody listens.” “I prayed for something like this riot,” said a twenty-three-year-old woman. “I generally hoped for it because you see this way we have to get along. We have to have unity now.” A teenager retorted, “I’m going to throw bricks
until winter. And when winter comes I’m going to throw snowballs.” This re-
sort of the poor to direct action was momentarily over, but resumed the follow-
ing year with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The 1968 Riots

On Thursday, April 4, 1968, the assassination of the preeminent African
American leader rocked the nation. As the news of King’s death spread that
evening, poor black Americans who lived in the nation’s ghettos reacted with
anger and hatred against the white community. Riots broke out in over 160
cities, with catastrophic results in the largest urban ghettos. For example, in
Washington, D.C., there were eleven people killed, 1,113 injured, over 2,000 ar-
rested, and $24 million in property damage. Called in to quell the violence were
12,500 national guard and federal troops. Similar large-scale violence erupted in
Chicago and Detroit, resulting in deaths and damage and necessitating a mas-
sive infusion of troops. Every city that contained a black ghetto, no matter its
size, suffered through rioting in revenge for the death of King. Boston’s violence
was more contained and on a smaller scale than other cities, but it demonstrated
the sense of despair and powerlessness of the black poor.

The rioting took place in the black neighborhoods of Roxbury, North Dor-
chester, and the South End. The worst disturbances occurred in the Grove
Hall–Blue Hill Avenue section, the scene of the welfare riot of 1967. A newspa-
per reported that these neighborhoods “seethed with emotion and tension . . .
angry bands of Negro youths stoned cars and buses traversing Blue Hill ave. [sic]
screaming their vengeance and pathos.” Police cars and firemen were especial
targets for stoning. “A massive mob of youths were milling around the Heath
st. [sic] housing project in Roxbury wielding clubs and swinging chains.” The
false alarms started, liquor stores were emptied of their contents, a fire blazed
in a furniture store, and the crowd began pulling white passersby from their
cars, beating them.

Black community leaders had feared such actions because of their experi-
ence in 1967, and they had formed a volunteer unit of young men to cope with
inflammatory situations such as this one. Volunteers wearing white armbands
went out to cruise the community and cool tempers. Two black volunteers driv-
ing a YMCA truck saved a white motorist from the hands of his attackers by
simply carrying him away in their arms. One of the volunteers described the
emotions of the rioters and their anger at the injustice of the system: “It was not safe to be a white man in Roxbury. That's the way it was and I don't know if that has changed. We will not allow ourselves to be mistreated any longer.” A crowd viciously beat a light-skinned black on a motorcycle until one of his attackers recognized him. The police cordoned off a two-mile radius of the Grove Hall section, but looting, arson, and stonings continued until about three in the morning, when rain began to fall.

Early Friday morning, Mayor Kevin White (who had succeeded Collins by defeating Louise Day Hicks in 1967) consulted with black leaders, especially newly elected city councilman Thomas Atkins. The mayor authorized the black volunteers to continue their efforts and decided that a smaller police presence might help calm the rioters. Atkins and his cohorts actively roamed the ghetto pleading for peace. Two thousand police sealed off the ghetto from downtown. These actions probably had much to do with keeping down the level of violence. Nonetheless, that day witnessed more actions against symbols of white authority.

Roving black bands in Roxbury, appearing more organized than before, posted flyers on shop doors and windows in the ghetto area, proclaiming, “This store is closed until further notice in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, the fallen martyr of the black revolution.” Another group of four hundred protesters, with walkie-talkies and bullhorns, marched on Roxbury’s Jeremiah E. Burke High School. They burned an American flag, went inside and ripped up a picture of John F. Kennedy, destroyed other displays, and vandalized furniture and water pipes. A crowd member stole a teacher’s handbag, another teacher suffered a head injury, and rioters pulled two teachers from their cars in the parking lot and manhandled them. The demonstrators/rioters demanded that officials close the school to mourn Dr. King. Small groups of blacks continued looting stores and stoning motorists, police, and firemen throughout the day and evening. As a precautionary measure, Mayor White asked the governor’s office to assemble some guard units, but they were never used.

On Saturday “An uncanny calm settled over the Roxbury-Dorchester district.” Mayor White told reporters, “The major trouble has subsided. The city has not undergone the reaction to the degree that gripped other cities in the country. We had communication with Negro leaders, and it is continuing. I felt the worst has already gone by.” There were thirty arrests, thirteen injuries, and only $50,000 in damages reported, much less than in many other cities. But ten-
tion prevailed in the black community, and a confrontation would flare up once again in September over issues that affronted the dignity of Boston’s black ghetto youths.

Stung by the blatant racism and lack of opportunity that prevailed in the nation, many blacks had sought to increase their self-esteem by emphasizing their roots and their “blackness.” African American students at Boston’s English High School, on Louis Pasteur Avenue in Roxbury, organized an all-black club. They sought recognition of their club and the right to wear African style clothing and headdresses to school. Over the objections of the faculty, the headmaster gave in to their demands, only to be reversed by the deputy school superintendent. In protest, five hundred black students walked out of school on Tuesday, September 24, 1968, and demonstrations quickly spread to six more predominantly black schools.

The footloose students vandalized cars and stores, set fires, and stoned firemen who tried to put out the blazes. They assaulted teachers at two middle schools, and threw ammonia bombs and started fires at another school. Behind Brighton High School, black teenagers blocked the driveway and stoned fireman who attempted to put out the fires that were set. Next door to the school, a meat market had its windows broken and displays taken. White students streamed out of schools as well, joining in the vandalism and protesting the privileged dress code given to blacks. The all-white Boston School Committee voted unanimously to request that the National Guard be called out. Mayor White quickly rejected this demand, believing it would cause more violence.

On Wednesday, some five hundred black students from several schools met at the White Athletic Stadium in Roxbury. As they left they clashed with police in a violent melee that lasted thirty minutes. “Police were pelted with bricks, rocks and beer cans from rooftops and along Columbia rd. [sic].” Leaving the area, students wandered down the street assaulting passersby, breaking windows, and burning cars. The next day matters worsened near the Orchard Park public housing project in Roxbury. Large gangs of blacks threw rocks and bottles at passing motorists and police cars. Rioters smashed several store windows, but no looting occurred. On one occasion police officers fired shots in the air sending young boys running off. The crowd diminished as evening approached, and vanished by midnight. Nine police officers and three volunteers were among the sixteen injured. Police arrested eight youths, but damage to property
was minimal. The deputy superintendent of schools capitulated, and black stu-
dents won the battle over wearing African dress.

The riots of 1967 and 1968 gave vent to the discontent of the African Amer-
ican poor. Feeling betrayed and excluded from the American system, angered
by their sense of impotence, and demanding to be heard, black plebeians chose
direct action—communal social violence—to redress long-held grievances. In
choosing rioting to make themselves heard, they joined with a long line of Bos-
ton’s poor common people who for three centuries broke the law rather than
suffer in silence. Racial tension remained high in Boston. While no more ghetto
riots took place, poor blacks turned to violence on several occasions in retalia-
tion for what they considered to be white provocations. They did so when white
working-class Bostonians rioted to prevent school busing in Boston beginning
in 1974.