THE PRECIPITANTS AND UNDERLYING CONDITIONS OF RACE RIOTS *

STANLEY LIEBERSON AND ARNOLD R. SILVERMAN
University of Wisconsin

The immediate precipitants and underlying conditions of 76 race riots in the U.S. between 1913 and 1963 are examined, using journalistic accounts and census data. The precipitants tend to be highly charged violations of one racial group by the other—rape, murder, assault, and police brutality. Since many of these precipitants are normally dealt with by established community institutions and because the response is not restricted to the alleged aggressor, various underlying conditions must be present. Hypotheses derived from earlier case studies and texts on collective behavior are examined to determine why riots occur where they do rather than in other cities of comparable size and location. Occupational and municipal government characteristics influence the occurrence of riots; demographic and housing characteristics do not. Riots seem most likely to occur in communities where institutional malfunctioning, cross-pressures, or other inadequacies are such that the city is unable to resolve racial problems.

The immediate precipitants and underlying conditions of race riots in the U.S. during the past half century are the subject of this paper. Using both "hard" and "soft" data, employing journalistic accounts as well as census data, we consider in a somewhat more systematic fashion the influence of diverse factors suggested as causes of riots in sociological case studies and texts on collective behavior.1

* The comments of Alma and Karl Taeuber, and David Heise are gratefully acknowledged.


Riots, as distinguished from Lynchings and other forms of collective violence, involve an assault on persons and property simply because they are part of a given subgroup of the community. In contrast, Lynchings and other types of violence are directed toward a particular individual as a collective response to some specific act. In practice, this distinction is sometimes difficult to apply, particularly in deciding when a localized racial incident has become a riot.2 We have excluded some of the housing "riots" from our analysis because they were directed specifically at Negroes attempting to move into an area rather than at Negroes per se or some other more generalized target.

Using the New York Times Index for the period between 1913 and 1963, we found 72 different events that might be properly classified as Negro-white race riots. Descriptions of riots in various editions of the Negro Yearbook supplemented some of the Times reports and also provided reports of four additional riots. In several instances, magazines and local newspapers were used for further information. Finally, we employed the sociological descriptions available for some race riots. Reliance on journalistic accounts for our basic sample of riots means the study is vulnerable to any selectivity in the riots actually reported in the

* Lyncheings, for example, are sometimes followed by riots. No doubt we would have included some of these events and excluded others had more detail been available.
newspaper. Our analysis of the immediate precipitants of race riots is similarly limited by the brevity of some of the descriptive accounts as well as by possible distortions in reporting. For the underlying community conditions of riots, we relied largely on census data.

IMMEDIATE PRECIPITANT

As one might expect, race riots are usually sparked by a provocation involving members of the two races. At most only four of the 76 riots occurred without a precipitating event, and even in these few cases, the apparent lack of precipitant may be due to the scantiness of the accounts rather than the absence of an immediate cause. In riots, life and property are treated with indifference and recklessness contrary to basic values in western society (except in wartime), and it is therefore important to ask what kind of events precipitate such an acute breakdown of social control, and whether these precipitants are uncommon occurrences of an exceptionally provocative nature.

Although lynchings are not riots, data gathered on the immediate causes of the 3,700 lynchings in the U.S. between 1889 and 1930 are illuminating. Of the known accusations, more than a third (37.7 per cent) were murder; in nearly a quarter (23.4 per cent) the accusation was rape or attempted rape; assault was the charge in 5.8 per cent and theft in 7.1 per cent. Compared with the frequency of these felonies in the South, murder and rape—violations of strong social taboos—are greatly over-represented as precipitants of lynchings.

In the same fashion, we suggest, the immediate precipitants of race riots almost always involve some confrontation between the groups in which members of one race are deeply "wronged" in fact or in rumor by members of the other. Precipitants tend to be transgressions of strongly held mores by a representative of the other group. The difficulty is to obtain an independent judgment of the severity of offenses that precipitate riots.

For two rather frequent types of precipitants, we can offer some independent evidence of their intensity. First, riots are often precipitated in the U.S. by crimes—particularly alleged crimes against persons rather than property alone, or the public order. Murder, rape, assault, manslaughter, and theft by means of violence or intimidation arouse the greatest concern and receive the most publicity in the mass media. In 1950, the median sentence received by men found guilty of offenses against persons was 9.9 years, whereas it was 3.9 years for those charged with other felonies. Even excluding murder, sentences for other felonies against persons were more than twice as long as those for offenses solely against property or the public order. Since punishment reflects the public's values with respect to the intrinsic "evil" of various acts, it is in this sense an independent measure of the severity of acts that precipitate race riots.

Another class of events that apparently violate strongly held norms involve Negroes crossing the various segregation barriers erected against them. Particularly frequent as precipitants in recent years, these acts are "bad" only because Negro-white interaction occurs in a form generally prohibited, e.g., when Negroes use the same swimming pool as whites.

We have classified the 72 riots for which data are available in terms of the nature of

---


---


the immediate precipitant of the violence. (See Table 1.) The reader should recognize that it is not always clear which event triggered a riot, especially when a chain of inter-related events occurs. Not only is it difficult to specify where the riot begins and the precipitant ends, but often there are several precipitants. In these cases we have determined whether at least some of the events involve offenses against relatively sacred values.

A sizable majority of the precipitants do involve an actual or rumored violation of one group by a member of the other. The ten cases in which white women were attacked by Negro men are highly inflammatory; apparently these involve violations of an extremely strong taboo. Highly charged acts to begin with, the murder, rape, or assault of women is even more serious an offense when offender and victim are of different races. Negroes were almost half of all persons executed for murder by civil authorities in the United States between 1930 and 1952 and nearly 90 per cent of those executed for rape. In their analysis of the 1943 Los Angeles zoot-suiters riot, Turner and Surace describe sexual assault as the dominant trigger:

The most prominent charge from each side was that the other had molested its girls. It was reported that sailors became enraged by the rumor that zoot-suiters were guilty of "assaults on female relatives of servicemen." Similarly, the claim against sailors was that they persisted in molesting and insulting Mexican girls. While many other charges were reported in the newspapers, including unsubstantiated suggestions of sabotage of the war effort, the sex charges dominated the precipitating context.9

The second type of precipitant, offenses committed by white law-enforcement officials against Negroes, involves white transgression of norms no less sacred than those involved in the rape of white women by Negro men. The Harlem riot during World War II started when a Negro woman was arrested by a white policeman for disorderly conduct. A Negro soldier, on leave, tried to stop him and the ensuing fight ended with both men in the hospital, the policeman with a battered head and the soldier with a pistol wound in the shoulder. Of greatest interest here is the account of the incident that spread through the Negro community: a Negro soldier was said to have been shot in the back and killed by a white policeman in the presence of the Negro's mother.10

The Harlem riot of July, 1964 was precipitated by a demonstration protesting the slaying of a 15-year old Negro boy by a white policeman, an act viewed as a wanton exercise of police brutality. The Bedford-Stuyvesant, Rochester, Jersey City, and Philadelphia riots of 1964—also outside the period covered in our study—were also precipitated by arrests or the presence of police.11

Both the fatal shooting of the boy and the rumored treacherous shooting of a soldier during wartime, in front of his mother, are highly inflammatory acts because they arouse some of the strongest sentiments the population holds, and they are especially inflammatory because they were committed by members of one race against another. In addition, offenses committed by white law enforcement officials, highly inflammatory in themselves, are aggravated when they involve actual or alleged wrong-doing on the part of officials expected to uphold and administer the law in an impartial manner. A number of recent race riots over civil-rights issues have been precipitated by police behavior, particularly in breaking up demon-

---

9 Turner and Surace, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
strations. We shall have more to say about the role of the police in our discussion of the underlying conditions of race riots.

The next category of precipitants, "Other inter-racial murder or shooting," calls for little additional comment. The shooting of white policemen by Negro men (three cases), although intrinsically not as inflammatory as inter-racial offenses against women and children, nevertheless involves murder or attempted murder of a representative of the government. The rumored beating to death of a Negro boy in a New York department store after he was seized for shoplifting, and the rumors of brutal assaults on women and children that circulated among both races during the Detroit race riot of World War II, are clearly in accord with our thesis that the precipitants tend to be violations of important mores. In two cases rumors of impending violence precipitated actual riots. In one instance there was a rumor of a forthcoming riot and in the other, anticipation of a lynching. In both instances, the rumors involved inter-racial violation of rights widely accepted as fundamental. Finally, two of the other four inter-racial murders or shootings were accompanied by Negro offenses against white women: as we noted earlier, more than one element may be involved in the precipitation of a race riot. In one of these incidents, a white man was murdered by three Negroes and a rumor arose that he had been trying to protect a white woman from these men.

In the other, a Negro had made derogatory statements about a white woman over whom a Negro had been lynched some weeks before.

Most of the 16 race riots precipitated by inter-racial fights without the use of lethal weapons do not appear to involve offenses of the most intense nature. One difficulty here is that the accounts of these riots are so scanty that we do not know whether rumors existed, over what issue the fights started, or other features that may have made the incident especially inflammatory, e.g., a young adult attacking an elderly person or a cripple. A fairly common element in riots with this type of precipitant is a chain of events in which members of each racial group come to the assistance of others already engaged in the fight. This tends to excite the onlookers who arrive after the initial provocation, particularly if members of one race appear to be receiving the worse part of the battle.

"Civil liberties, public facilities, segregation, political events, and housing" is a residual category involving diverse precipitants. Some of the precipitants fit the thesis that sacred values were violated. For example, a riot in upstate New York in the mid-thirties was precipitated by whites attempting to break up a meeting called to rally support for a Negro accused of attacking a white girl. From the white point of view this involves the not uncommon theme of sexual molesting; from the other side, it is a white attempt to prevent Negroes' efforts to insure fair treatment for a Negro accused of a provocative act. A riot in Athens, Ala., in 1946 involved whites protesting police favoritism after a brawl for which two whites had been arrested and a Negro escaped. But for the most part, it is difficult to establish conclusively the extent to which the precipitants in this category were offenses against inter-racial mores. In some cases we are tempted to say that they were—the two just mentioned, or the Negro boy attempting to dance with a white girl at a city-sponsored dance—but in others, we are less certain about the nature of the acts.

Of the five job-based riots, three involved the allegation that Negroes were or had been strike breakers, one was over the up-grading of jobs held by Negroes, and one was simply in an industrial setting. Taking a conservative stance, we would not be inclined to label these as violations of sacred norms.

 Burning an American flag is a different type of offense, for it violates neither the

12 New York Times, August 28, 1934, p. 3.
person nor any segregation taboo, but it is clearly an offense against one of the nation's most sacred symbols. We shall say more about this type of precipitant, which is unusual for riots in the U.S., when we discuss racial and ethnic riots elsewhere in the world.

In brief, at least a sizable proportion of the immediate precipitants of race riots appear to involve inter-racial violations of intense societal norms. Noteworthy are the large number of events in which bodily injury is the precipitant as well as the smaller number of cases precipitated by violations of inter-racial segregation taboos.

UNDERLYING CONDITIONS

Applying Durkheim's typology, we observe that many of the immediate precipitants were acts that call for repressive sanctions, that is, they "consisted essentially in an act contrary to strong and defined states of the common conscience." Repressive sanctions are normally administered under penal law by courts in the U.S. For example, murder, rape, and other acts of physical violence are strongly disapproved and severely punished in our society. Many, though not all, of the violations of segregation taboos in the period studied were also punishable through law enforcement, but in these instances, at least some members of either or both racial populations were unable to accept the institutions normally used for handling such offenses. Instead a riot occurred, involving, by definition, a generalized response directed at a collectivity rather than the offender—indeed, the actual offender was often untouched.

Although the immediate precipitants were highly inflammatory, we may still ask why a riot occurred rather than the normal processes of arrest, trial, and punishment, for inter-racial friction occurs far more often than the small number of occasions that erupted into race riots indicates. Why did violence break out where it did rather than at other places where similar incidents occurred? Or to put it another way, the types of violation described earlier probably occur almost daily, yet in most instances they do not lead to collective violence. Are there special circumstances that increase or decrease the chances of a riot ensuing?

One possible interpretation of the location and timing of riots is simply that riots are randomly distributed. Any precipitating incident of this type increase the chances of a riot, but there is no systematic reason why riots occur when and where they do, other than possible differences among cities in the frequency of precipitating incidents. A second approach is based on the notion that certain social conditions in the community increase the probability that a precipitating incident will lead to a riot. From this perspective, we can ask whether cities experiencing riots differ from other cities with regard to the institutional conditions suggested as increasing the chances of a riot.

Poisson distribution. To evaluate the first interpretation, that is, whether riots are randomly distributed in time and place, we used the Poisson distribution, which the low frequency of race riots (1.5 per year between 1913 and 1963) makes appropriate for comparing the actual frequency of riots with what would be expected in a random distribution. Columns 2 and 3 of Table 2 show, respectively, the actual and expected number of riots per year in the 51 years from 1913 through 1963. Inspection indicates that the Poisson distribution yields a poor fit. For example, in 26 of the years no riot was reported though the theoretical distribution would lead us to expect only 11 such years. Applying the appropriate chi-square test for goodness of fit, we conclude that we cannot accept the assumption that the probability of riots is equal each year.

In similar fashion, we can consider the concentration of riots in cities. Restricting ourselves to the 333 cities with 50,000 or more population in 1960, we have compared the actual and expected frequencies of cities experiencing a specified number of riots.


There are more cities without any riots, and more with several, than would be expected on the basis of the Poisson distribution (columns 5 and 6): riots occurred in only 33 of these cities. The goodness-of-fit test confirms our impression that the theoretical distribution does not fit the actual distribution of riots in cities.

Two types of sampling bias may have influenced these results. First, newspapers probably fluctuate in their propensity to report riots, so that the frequency of riots at a given point in time increases the probability that riots occurring shortly afterwards will be reported. This is analogous to the tendency of newspapers to make the frequency of rapes or other events into a crime wave when in fact the major variable is the frequency of reporting such events. A second possible bias arises from the fact that our primary source is the New York Times. Milder forms of racial violence in metropolitan New York and the mid-Atlantic area are more likely to be covered than riots of equivalent severity elsewhere. This would lead to a distribution of repeated riots different from that expected on the basis of the Poisson formula. Also, note that our test refers only to riots, not to precipitating incidents per se. Therefore we can reach no conclusions with respect to the distribution of precipitants by time or place. These difficulties notwithstanding, the results give us no reason to think riots are random with respect to time and place.

### A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Since the type of event that precipitates riots is far more common than actual riots, we ask whether this form of collective violence is due to underlying conditions that keep at least one segment of the population from accepting the normal institutional response to a provocative incident. From this perspective, precipitants are a necessary but not sufficient cause of riots.

A rather wide-ranging array of interpretations have been advanced after the occurrence of riots in particular communities. Such factors as rapidly expanding Negro population, economic hardships, police brutality, job ceilings, Negro competition with whites, slums, unsympathetic city officials, contagion, communist elements, agitators, warm weather, unruly elements, and others have figured in popular and semi-popular interpretations of race riots. Although case studies of race riots are extremely valuable where they provide an accurate description of events before and during a riot, obviously it is impossible to determine which factors are critical on the basis of one city's experience.

When we move from the presentation of plausible reasons to a systematic empirical test of the actual importance of various at-

---

#### Table 2. Race Riots: Actual and Expected Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riots per Year</th>
<th>Observed Frequency</th>
<th>Poisson Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Years</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Riots per Year</th>
<th>Observed Frequency</th>
<th>Poisson Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>281.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Cities</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>333.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

distributes in increasing the chances of riots, we encounter serious difficulties. Not only do we have a plethora of independent variables, but their actual significance is very difficult to test. Quantitative data on many of these characteristics are scarce, and in any case it is difficult to know how much causal significance to attribute anyway. For example, a riot may occur in a city containing a Negro slum area. The cruel truth is that housing conditions for Negroes are inferior in virtually every city in the U.S. To infer a causal link, one must determine not whether Negro slums exist in the riot city, but whether that city is worse in this respect than others where no riots occurred. Similarly, in any large city unemployed whites and Negroes might respond to an opportunity for a racial riot. Again the question is whether an unusually large number of such people live in one community compared with another.

Our requirements for quantitative data covering at least part of a 50-year span limit the causal hypotheses we can test. For the most part we have relied on U.S. censuses of the past six decades for data bearing on some of the propositions encountered in case studies and popular interpretations of race riots. This part of our study, therefore, necessarily has a certain ad hoc quality.

**Method.** To examine the influence of variables others have suggested as underlying causes of race riots, we used a paired-comparison analysis. Each city experiencing a riot was compared with a city as similar as possible in size and region which had no riot in the ten years preceding or following the riot date. Preference was given to the city in the same state closest in population size, with the provision that it have at least half but no more than twice the population of the riot city. Where no such city existed we selected the city closest in size in the same subregion or region.22 We compared the very largest cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, with other leading centers in the nation closest in population, regardless of region.

Using the nonparametric sign test, we evaluated the extent to which riot cities differ from their control cities in the direction hypothesized. When a given city experienced more than one riot, it was included as many times as the number of riots. Because census data by size of place and decade were not always available, our "N" in most cases is considerably less than the 76 riots discussed earlier. For convenience in presentation, we have divided the hypotheses into four major categories: population growth and composition; work situation; housing; and government.

**DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS**

The rapid influx of Negroes and sometimes whites into cities is certainly one of the most frequently cited reasons for the occurrence of race riots. Although large-scale migration is not usually viewed as a sufficient cause for a riot, it is commonly considered important because rapid influx disrupts the on-going social order and creates various problems in the Negro community. For 66 riots we could determine the growth of the Negro and white populations between the census years preceding and following the race riot, for each riot city and for a comparable community selected at the beginning of the decade. We thus have data for 66 pairs of cities, each pair consisting of a riot city and a control city.

In about half the cases, percentage increases in both total and white population were smaller in the riot cities than in the non-riot cities. Moreover, in 56 per cent of the comparisons the control cities experienced greater percentage increases in Negro population than the riot cities did. Our results clearly fail to support the contention that rapid population change accompanies riots. For the years between 1917 and 1921—a period marked by both Negro migration and numerous riots—we found no sizable difference between riot and control cities in their percentage gains in Negro population during the decades. Also contrary to expectation are the differences in racial composition of riot and control cities. Again for 66 pairs,
we find that in exactly half the comparisons, the proportion of Negroes is smaller in the riot city than in its control city.

Since this comparative approach is used with succeeding hypotheses, we should consider briefly the implications of these findings. First, we draw no conclusions about whether Negro population growth in riot cities differs from its growth elsewhere in the U.S. Riot cities have experienced more rapid growth than the remainder of the nation simply because Negro population movement has been largely from rural to urban areas. Similarly, since our method is designed to compare riot cities only with other cities similar in size and region, we make no inferences about differences between riot cities and all other U.S. cities. What we do conclude is that riot cities do not differ from non-riot cities of the same size and region in their rates of population increase, and therefore that increases in population fail to explain the occurrence of outbreaks in one city rather than another.23

WORK SITUATION

Traditional occupations. The occupational world of Negroes is far more restricted than that of whites. In particular, certain occupational pursuits have been more or less “traditional” for urban Negroes. These are generally lower in both status and income. Accordingly, wherever possible we determined the proportion of Negro men in the labor force who are employed either as laborers or in domestic and service occupations. Needless to say, we were forced to use some rather crude measures as well as broad categories which undoubtedly include some occupations outside the “traditional” rubric. A serious difficulty is created by contradictory hypotheses that depend on which group appears to be the aggressor. On the one hand, we might expect greater antagonism on the part of Negroes in cities where they are relatively restricted in occupational opportunities, i.e., where most Negroes are in traditional pursuits. On the other hand, we might well expect that where Negroes fare relatively well in their efforts to break through the job restrictions, whites’ hostility might be greater and hence riots more likely to ensue.

For 43 riots we were able to determine the Negro occupational distribution in both the riot and control city during the closest census period. In 65 per cent of these paired comparisons (N = 28), the percentage of Negro men holding traditional occupations is lower in the riot city.24 This suggests that riots are due to the relative threat to whites where Negroes are less concentrated in their traditional pursuits. If such were the case, then we might expect the white and Negro percentages in these occupations to be more alike in the riot city than in the control city. This is precisely what we find: in 30 of the 43 paired comparisons, the difference between whites and Negroes, in proportions engaged in laboring, domestic, and service occupations, is smaller in the riot city.25 The encroachment of Negroes in the white occupational world evidently tends to increase the chances of a riot, although we must also consider the possibility that Negro militancy increases as Negroes move out of their traditional niche.

Store owners. A more specific occupational factor sometimes associated with riots—particularly ghetto riots—is the low frequency of store ownership in Negro areas and the consequent resentment of white store owners in these areas. We are unable to get at these data directly. If we assume, however, that virtually all Negro store owners are located in the ghetto, then we can simply examine the percentage of employed Negro men who are self-employed in various facets of retail trade, such as store, restaurant, or tavern owners. Although differences between riot and control cities tend to be slight, nevertheless in 24 of 39 riots, the percentage of Negroes who are store

23 See Robin Williams, Jr., in collaboration with John P. Dean and Edward A. Suchman, Strangers Next Door, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp. 135–137. In a study based on a nationwide sample of cities, they find the general level of race conflict and tension no higher in cities with rapid population growth and high mobility than in those with relatively stable populations. In short, our method gets at the question of why riots occur in the particular cities they do, rather than in comparable urban centers.

24 Using a two-tailed test, p = .0672.

25 p = .0073, single-tailed test.
owners is larger in the nonriot city. Results might be even stronger had it been possible to subcategorize riots. For instance, the absence of Negro store owners would presumably contribute to Negroes’ rioting but would contribute relatively little to white assaults.

**Unemployment.** As was the case for traditional occupations, unemployment presents contradictory possibilities, so that we might well expect riots when either Negroes or whites have relatively high unemployment rates. Our analysis is even cruder here, since unemployment is far more volatile from year to year, and we are able to use data only for the closest census year. First, the white unemployment rate appears to have no influence on the likelihood of a riot. In 12 comparisons white unemployment rates were higher in the city experiencing the riot, and in 13 cases, higher in the control city. For Negro unemployment, results tend to run counter to what we might expect. Negro unemployment is higher in the control than in the riot city in 15 out of 25 comparisons. And Negro-white differences are lower in the riot than in the control city in 15 out of 25 comparisons.

These results do not confirm our expectations: high white unemployment apparently does not increase the chances of a riot, nor is high Negro unemployment associated with riots in the direction expected. On an aggregate basis, the number of riots during the Great Depression of the thirties was not unusually large. In view of the weakness of the data—particularly the fact that we do not have unemployment rates for the specific year in which the riots take place—all we can conclude is that we have failed to confirm the hypothesis, not that we have disproved it.

**Income.** Since the influence of income on riots may reflect either group’s position, our problem is similar to that discussed in connection with Negro occupational composition. Median income data are available for only 12 riots and their controls. In six comparisons Negro income is higher in the control city and in the other six it is higher in the riot city. In 11 of the 12 cases, however, white income in the riot city is lower than in the control. The difference between Negro and white income was larger in the city without a riot in ten of the 12 cases. The small number precludes analysis of these findings in greater detail, but we can observe that riots tend to occur in cities where white income is lower than that of whites in comparable areas. The lower white income also means that Negro-white differences tend to be smaller in these cities than in the control areas. Thus, the results, though extremely limited in time and place, do not support the notion that race riots are a consequence either of low Negro income or of relatively large Negro-white discrepancies in income.

**HOUSING**

Ghetto riots in particular are often attributed to the poor housing conditions of Negroes, but our data fail to disclose any tendency whatsoever for housing to be of lower quality in cities that have experienced riots. For 20 paired comparisons we could determine which city had a larger percentage of Negro families in sub-standard housing (using the census categories of “dilapidated” in 1950 and 1960 and “needing major repairs” in 1940). In ten cases the non-riot city had poorer Negro housing than the riot city. Although obviously not all riots could be considered ghetto riots, surely we should find some tendency for Negroes in cities experiencing riots to have poorer dwellings than they do in cities without riots, if it were true that poorer housing quality increases the likelihood of a race riot. Very likely, Negro housing is poor in so many locales that it cannot distinguish cities experiencing riots from those that do not.

**GOVERNMENT**

**Police.** Local government is one of the most important institutions to consider in an analysis of race riots. Municipal policies, particularly with respect to police, can

---

26 These differences are significant at the .10 level.
27 Although data are available for other years, to our knowledge none can be obtained by race for specific cities.
28 p = .212, single-tailed test.
29 p < .01, single-tailed test.
30 p = .038, two-tailed test.
greatly influence the chances of a race riot. Earlier, we observed that many of the precipitating incidents involve white police behavior toward Negroes, and adequate police training and tactics often prevent incident riots from developing. Moreover, police activities reflect the policies, sympathies, and attitudes of the local municipal government.

One often-cited factor in race riots is the lack of Negro policemen. First, one major complaint on the part of Negroes is that of white police brutality. So far as the police are Negroes, actual brutality will probably not arouse strong racial feelings. Second, police in some riots have encouraged or tolerated white violence toward Negroes, so that we might expect stronger police control where the force is mixed, as well as greater confidence in police protection among Negroes. Finally, since the number of Negro policemen is for the most part controlled by the city administration, the representation of Negroes is an indicator of city policies toward race relations in general.

Data are hard to obtain and for 1950 and 1960 we have been obliged to use census reports for entire metropolitan areas. Also, for some decades policemen are not reported separately from closely related occupations such as sheriffs and marshals. Nevertheless, of 38 pairs of cities, in 24 the city without the riot had more Negro policemen per thousand Negroes than did the matched city that experienced a riot. Although differences between riot and control cities are rather slight, these results do suggest that police force composition influences the likelihood of a riot.

City council. We hypothesize that the manner in which councilmen are elected and the relative size of the city council will influence the occurrence of riots. Our reasoning is based on several assumptions. The election of councilmen at large gives numerically smaller groups a greater handicap in expressing their interests than they encounter in communities where councilmen are elected directly from spatial districts.

In cities where the average size of a councilman’s constituency is small, we assume that representatives are more responsive to the wishes of the population and therefore that members of the community have a more adequate mechanism for transmitting their interests and concerns. This implies that more diverse interests will be expressed in the city’s governing body.

Our hypothesis is that the more direct the relation between voter and government, the less likely are riots to occur. A more responsive government makes riots less likely because it provides regular institutional channels for expressing grievances. Small districts provide more responsive government than large districts, and large districts, more than elections at large. In comparisons between a city with a city-wide election system and one where councilmen are elected both at large and by district, we classified the latter situation as the less likely to lead to riots. Where both cities have the same form of election, we computed the mean population per councilman. (Comparisons involving Deep South cities were based on the white population only.) Thus, we gave form of election priority over size of constituency in our causal hypothesis.

In 14 of 22 pairs, population per councilman was larger in the city experiencing the riot than in the control city, or elections at large were used in the riot city and direct election of representatives in the control city. Considering our inability to take into account the degree of gerrymandering in cities with direct representation, these results offer an encouraging degree of support for our hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of the precipitating and underlying conditions of race riots suggests several generalizations about their evolution. First, precipitating incidents often involve highly charged offenses committed by members of one group against the other, such as attacks on women, police brutality and interference, murder, and assault. In recent years, violation of segregation taboos by

32 p = .07, single-tailed test.
34 Though p is not significant (.143), the relationship is in the predicted direction.
Negroes as well as white resistance have been increasingly frequent precipitants. Riots are generalized responses in which there is categorical assault on persons and property by virtue of their racial membership. Such violence is not restricted and may even exclude the specific antagonists responsible for the precipitating event.

The diffuse response generated by the precipitating event, as well as the fact that often the alleged offenses are of the sort normally dealt with by appropriate communal institutions, suggests that additional factors channel the inflammatory act into a riot. Since there are usually a number of factors that could have contributed to a riot in any given community, we used a comparative approach to determine why riots occur in some cities and not in others of comparable size and location.

Going beyond our data and trying to place our findings in a broad framework, we suggest that riots are more likely to occur when social institutions function inadequately, or when grievances are not resolved, or cannot be resolved under the existing institutional arrangements. Populations are predisposed or prone to riot; they are not simply neutral aggregates transformed into a violent mob by the agitation or charisma of individuals. Indeed, the immediate precipitant simply ignites prior community tensions revolving about basic institutional difficulties. The failure of functionaries to perform the roles expected by one or both of the racial groups, cross-pressures, or the absence of an institution capable of handling a community problem involving inter-racial relations will create the conditions under which riots are most likely. Many riots are precipitated by offenses that arouse considerable interest and concern. When members of the victimized race are dubious about the intention or capacity of relevant functionaries to achieve justice or a "fair" solution, then the normal social controls are greatly weakened by the lack of faith in the community's institutions.

Our evidence supports the proposition that the functioning of local community government is important in determining whether a riot will follow a precipitating incident. Prompt police action can prevent riots from developing; their inaction or actual encouragement can increase the chances of a race riot. Riot cities not only employ fewer Negro policemen, but they are also communities whose electoral systems tend to be less sensitive to the demands of the electorate. Local government illustrates the possibility that riots occur when a community institution is malfunctioning, from the perspective of one or both racial segments.

Our finding that Negroes are less likely to be store owners in riot cities illustrates the problem arising when no social institution exists for handling the difficulties faced by a racial group. Small merchants require credit, skill and sophistication in operating and locating their stores, ability to obtain leases, and so on. To our knowledge no widely operating social institution is designed to achieve these goals for the disadvantaged Negro. Similarly, our finding that riots are more likely where Negroes are closer to whites in their proportions in "traditional" Negro occupations, and where Negro-white income differences are smaller, suggests that a conflict of interests between the races is inherent in the economic world.

Our use of significance tests requires further comment. Many of the relationships are in the direction predicted but fail to meet the normal standards for significance. Several extenuating circumstances help account for this. First, many of our hypotheses refer to specific types of riots: for example, some riots are clearly "white riots;" others, equally clearly, are Negro; and many are both, in the sense that extensive attacks are directed at both groups. Were the data in an ideal form, we could separate the ghetto riots, the white assaults, and the interracial warfare into separate categories, and then apply our hypotheses to specific subsets of riots. Because our sample is small and the accounts of many riots are very scanty, we are prepared to accept these weaker associations as at least consistent with our approach to the underlying conditions of race riots.

Several implications of our results are relevant to riots elsewhere. Racial and ethnic incidents in other parts of the world are also frequently precipitated by physical violence. Dahlke's description of the Kishinew pogrom in Russia ascribes considerable importance as a precipitant to the widespread legend that Jews annually kill Christian
children, as a part of their religious rites. The extensive riots in Ceylon in 1958 included a number of highly provocative rumors of inter-ethnic violations. For example, "a Sinhalese baby had been snatched from its mother's arms and immersed in a barrel of boiling tar." The Durban riots of 1949 were precipitated by an incident in which an African youth was knocked over by an Indian trader.

A number of other riots, however, are precipitated by violations of symbols rather than persons or taboos. The burning of an American flag by Negroes triggered a race riot in the United States. Our impression is that this type of precipitant is more common in some other parts of the world. Riots in Kashmir, West Bengal, and East Pakistan in late 1963 and early 1964, for example, were precipitated by the theft of a hair of the prophet Mohammed from a Mosque in Kashmir. One of the precipitants of the Chinese-Thai riots of 1945, the Yaorawat Incident, was the Chinese tendency to fly Chinese flags without also flying the Thai flag of the nation. Jews tore down the czar's crown from the town hall and damaged portraits of various rulers prior to Kiev's pogrom in 1905.

Our results also suggest that race riots are frequently misunderstood. We have encountered a number of accounts in the popular literature attributing riots to communist influence, hoodlums, or rabble-rousers. Although lower-class youths and young adults are undoubtedly active during riots, potential participants of this type are probably available in almost any community. What interests us is the community failure to see the riot in terms of institutional malfunctioning or a racial difficulty which is not met—and perhaps cannot be—by existing social institutions. Many riots in other parts of the world revolve about national political institutions such that a disadvantaged segment is unable to obtain recognition of its interests and concerns through normal political channels. While this type of riot is not common in the U.S., the same basic conditions exist when either whites or Negroes are unable to use existing institutions to satisfy their needs and interests.

---