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In 1964, The Civil Rights Act suspended all segregation laws in the United States. Although this was a pivotal moment in the history of social justice, this act did not completely rectify the lingering presence of segregation. Segregation was now illegal on paper, but its impact can still be observed in modern cities. In cities across the U.S., the geographic sections where different races live show the extent to which segregation still dramatically impacts cities. Detroit, Michigan is the most heavily segregated city in the U.S. based on the fine lines between neighborhoods of different races. Detroit is divided by Highway 102 and 8-Mile Road. A nearly all-white neighborhood exists on the north side, and a nearly all-Black neighborhood exists on the south side. This racial divide has deeply affected the quality of life on the south side. Higher rates of crime, poverty, incarceration, and single parenthood, along with lower levels of income and employment, are pervasive on the south side, compared to the national statistics and data of the white north side. These issues stem from a long history of segregation and systemic racism that The Civil Rights Act failed to solve in practice versus on paper. These inequalities continue to happen due to the lack of resources, jobs, and adequate public education systems for the city's south side.

In 1830, before Michigan was officially a state, jurors in Wayne County declared that a human “although possessing a black or yellow complexion” should not be deprived of the rights and privileges of “the common heritage of this happy and republican country”, showing that the government in Michigan was somewhat more accepting of minorities than other areas were at the time. Since the majority of oppressive laws applying to Black people were unenforced, the state's population of Black people grew relatively quickly: from 300 in 1830 to 2,500 in 1850. Furthermore, these numbers are estimated to be larger due to uncounted fugitive enslaved persons living in the state. In 1867, the state of Michigan prohibited segregation in public schools. However, the city of Detroit fought against this. The city believed that it should not apply to schools, arguing that “blacks and whites could not peaceably attend school together”. The state government denied Detroit's appeals. By 1883, Black people could attend the same schools as white people, and Black men could vote, serve in the militia, serve jury duty, and have interracial marriages. In 1890, Justice Allen B. Morse of Michigan declared that “there can be no separation in public places between people on account of their color alone which the law will sanction” (Finkleman, 2006).

In the early 1900's, Detroit was an economically thriving city. It accounted for one-sixth of the country's employment (Sugrue, 1996). From 1910 to 1930, the Black population soared from 6,000 to 120,000 as the automotive industry became increasingly larger in Detroit (Metzger, 2002). However, the rapid increase in population size put a strain on the city's schools and services. This led to a housing shortage that displaced Black residents to impoverished areas. In 1939, the Federal Housing Authority published housing maps. The section of Detroit that is suffering today had been redlined -- meaning that the area was considered to be risky neighborhoods and that people living there would not be able to get federally backed loans (Miller, 2018). Post-World War II, Black people received only 2 percent of loans (typically only in areas where other Black people lived) while they represented 10 percent of the population

(Witherspoon, 2019). The original FHA evaluator report for Boyle Heights, California said that diverse neighborhoods were a “hazardous residential territory”. The negative impact of this pervasive racist sentiment can still be seen today, as a portion of 8-Mile Road has a concrete wall that was built to divide the Black and white neighborhoods. Developers built the wall because there was valuable land on the north side that they wanted to use to build a “whites-only” neighborhood, but they had to prove that there would be no mixing of races (Miller, 2018).

In 1967, a five-day riot consumed the city over police brutality. Ninety-five percent of the police force was white in a city that was suffering from racism and segregation. An undercover police officer went into an unlicensed club and stayed inside for over 10 minutes to signal for the rest of the police force to enter the club. The police began arresting several Black citizens. Soon, a crowd gathered and eventually a bottle cap was thrown at a police officer that resulted in chaos. Governor George Romney called in the National Guard and thousands of paratroopers. During the riots, 43 people died, 1,189 were injured, over 7,200 people were arrested, and hundreds of buildings were burned (Brown, 2020). This riot was a turning point in the history of Detroit, as Black people collectively found the strength to fight back against the government oppressing them. The history of Black people in Detroit, Michigan began with relatively more equality than in other states, but then regressed back, resulting in little geographical and economical change to date.

Segregation in Detroit has had unmeasurable psychological impacts on the Black community that populates the south side. In a Detroit News poll, the majority of Black and white residents did not see much harm in living separately. In the same poll, people were asked to list the biggest problems facing their neighborhoods. White people listed traffic and overdevelopment, while Black people listed crime and neighborhood deterioration. Clearly, the residential experience for Black people on the south side was riddled with more hardships and less resources to mitigate them, compared to the white experience on the north side. Harvard University psychiatrist Dr. Alwin Poussaint found that racial segregation and isolation does affect Black people more than white people, and that “segregation promotes the devaluation of black life even among blacks, and can lead to self-hatred” (Brand Williams, 2020). A past resident of Detroit, Joseph Adams, concluded that “when you segregate people based on color (even by choice) you create an atmosphere of distrust” (Upton, 2020). He further explained that:

When you create distrust there is going to be violence, negative thinking, and an uncomfortable place to live. The best living areas are places where you’re comfortable regardless of color. Unless we get to that point, we’re always going to have problems in the Detroit area. (Upton, 2020)

Detroit is currently the most dangerous city in the U.S. based on a violent crime rate of 1,965 violent crimes per 100,000 people (Nissen, 2020). Police Chief James Craig of Detroit states that the high violent crime rate in Black neighborhoods is due to the increase of illegal guns in the area. He estimates that the city’s police arrest eighty-five to one-hundred-thirty people per week for illegally carrying guns, but that typically those arrested end up back on the street with probation and go on to commit a violent crime (Macdonald, 2020). According to a veteran Detroit police gang unit member, the high crime numbers are related to gangs and drugs.

Judge Kenneth King at 36th District Court said that police are working to get guns off the street, but that poverty is what is causing gangs to go to war and that it will only turn around when the public education system improves (Ley). On November 24, 2020, the city council approved gunshot detection technology that would place cameras at traffic lights and alert police of gunfire (Rahal). Unfortunately, this measure does not address the root of the problem. Rather than providing better public education or after-school programs that would keep Black children away from the cycle of gang-related activity, this “solution” instead favors the side of the oppressor by increasing policing measures.

In 2009, Detroit was found to be the lowest-performing urban school district on national standardized tests. When it comes time for college, only ten percent of high school seniors score “college ready” on reading tests. In 1993, state law had allowed for many institutions, more than any other state, to create charter schools. However, for-profit companies took the opportunity and now operate eighty percent of the charter schools in Detroit. Their goal with founding numerous charter schools was to foster academic competition, but instead this has forced schools to fight over students by enticing them to enroll with laptops, raffle tickets, cash, etc. With limited public funding going towards the charter schools, none of them can thrive. Michigan politician Scott Romney had said “the point was to raise all schools” but “instead, we’ve had a total complete collapse of education in this city”.

Black Detroit resident Shannton Gaston, a day care operator, has had to spend her retirement money in order to send her children to private schools, since the public schools on the south side are inadequate. Another mother, Ana Rivera, had enrolled her son at the charter school across from their home. He was receiving all A’s and wanted to be an engineer one day. When her son entered 7th grade, the school stopped assigning homework, so Ana began looking for better schools. She was able to find him a scholarship at a Catholic school. However, the lack of quality at the charter school showed when he transferred, because he could barely obtain grades above a D and had not learned the proper cumulative skills for his grade level. The Detroit public school system failed him, and his mother claims it crushed his future goals, citing that he “doesn’t want to hear the word engineering” again. With all of the different school options and schools competing to bring in the most students to maximize government funding, Detroit’s public school system is a difficult landscape for parents to navigate (Zernike, 2016). Federal statistics show that forty-seven percent of adults in Detroit are at “level 1 literacy”, a level at which they typically would not be able to read bills or timetables (Reder, 1998). As financial literacy is a necessary skill to move a person from poverty to a suitable income, it is clear that the inadequate public education system of Detroit is a contributing factor to wealth inequality between Black and white residents.

In the last five years, Detroit has lost three hospitals and fifty percent of its primary-care providers have fled to the suburbs to find patients with better insurance. This means that 8-mile road residents have to wait longer to get medical care if they can even access it (Brand Williams, 2020). Studies have found that in highly segregated metropolitan areas, Black residents suffer from higher rates of suicide, high blood pressure, and heart disease than their white counterparts. In Michigan at large, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mortality rate for Black people was 4.5 times higher than that of white people. Due to this, on August 5, 2020, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer declared racism a public health crisis and ordered for all state employees to take implicit bias training. She also created a state advisory council and a Black leadership advisory council. When looking at how poor living conditions affect health, Dr. Khari

Brown, Associate Professor of Sociology at Wayne State University, found that “when you look at the numbers beyond COVID, for Black people, they have the worst health conditions -- diabetes, heart conditions, obesity, high blood pressure -- because of diet and poverty, the stressors for living in poverty” (Brody, 2020). Systemic racism forces poor health outcomes to follow wealth inequality in Michigan.

The persisting issues in Detroit rooted in segregation were brought even further to national attention in 2013, when the city of Detroit filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy. Funds available from the federal government were allocated to projects in the central business district and riverfront. Redevelopment deals, land provision, and fiscal abatement were granted to auto-makers and other large corporations in the name of benefitting low-income communities. In 2010, the mayor introduced the DWP (Detroit Works Project) with the goal to help “restore southeast Michigan to a position of leadership in the new global economy”. Since 2013, notable improvements in Detroit include: Quicken Loans moving into the city and creating 1700 jobs, new hotels and restaurants in the downtown, 200 new housing units around Wayne State University in once abandoned mansions and apartment buildings, improving property taxes, and new streetlights. Despite these accomplishments, the south side is not experiencing enough revival.

The Mexicantown Community Association has been working towards improving the living conditions for residents by promoting restaurants, shopping, cultural programs, and activities to improve the city (Rodriquez). Additionally, the non-profit Bagley Housing Association has collaborated with the Citizen’s District Council, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, and the Detroit Founders Collaborative to improve the living conditions of low-income families and to restore schools and parks (Murray, 2006). To bring jobs and businesses back to 8-mile, the Southwest Detroit Business Association has been working to provide financial resources for small and local businesses and to create an environment to help businesses grow. They offer grants under the Commercial Matching Grant Program to help members of the community start-up, expand, and continue running their businesses. In the last five years, they have given out 1.65 million dollars in grants (Southwest Detroit Business Association, 2006).

While other major cities have continued to grow and expand, Detroit has been declining in prosperity. Smaller cities surrounding Detroit have been expanding, but Detroit remains the outlier. In order to begin revitalizing Detroit, taxes should first be lowered. In 2014, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy found that Detroit has the highest property tax rates of any major city in the U.S., while the services the city provides are failing, such as not enough police, schools that are falling apart, abandoned buildings that sit for decades, and more. Most of the money from taxes goes to “worker-related liabilities, including retiree pensions and healthcare” but the money is not invested back into the city. Additionally, regulation needs to be reduced because the city does not allow for sufficient economic freedom and has strict occupational licensing laws. The Detroit Land Bank Authority has a history of hoarding land that investors would eagerly seek to purchase and develop. The high taxes, overregulation, and corruption has discouraged capital from entering Detroit, which has led its continuing economic decline (Beyer, 2018). Furthermore, education needs to be improved. The high number of schools is causing a decline in quality among all the schools. Therefore, the number of charter schools that are allowed to be in the city should be reduced in order to centralize the money available for education into a few schools rather than dozens.

In conclusion, segregation of the past has left an unnoticed impact on the city of Detroit today. The city can only be saved if more action is taken to revitalize it. From an intersectional perspective on social issues, we can surmise that the effects of segregation have led to inadequate schooling, poor access to healthy food, lower quality housing, higher rates of violent crime and gang activity, and more issues, where the problems from one area compound the negative results of another. While segregation has been done away with on paper, it can be argued that segregation continues in Detroit, and hinders opportunities for Black residents to prosper economically.

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