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Youth Involvement in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in Birmingham, Alabama

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During the 1960s, the fight for civil rights in the United States was one of the most prevalent social issues affecting the country. Organizations and individuals throughout the United States called for racial justice and for the termination of segregation in the South. A group that had a significant impact on the outcome of the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham, Alabama was young children. In Birmingham, the local coalition began to call for children to march in protests in place of their parents. So, if arrests were to transpire, less economic stress would occur because adults could still be working and making an income. From May 2nd to May 7th, 1963, over 2,000 children marched across Birmingham, Alabama to nonviolently protest racial inequality in their city. Children's involvement in the 1960s civil rights protests in Birmingham was critical to a successful outcome in the movement. While youth involvement was not the sole reason the movement in Birmingham was a success, it allowed families to continue earning income while still fighting for racial justice.

The fight for racial justice was one of the primary social issues occurring in the United States during the 1960s, there was a country-wide demand to end segregation and advocate for racial equality, especially in the South. Segregation was intertwined within Southern life for Black Americans throughout these times. Separate water fountains, bathrooms, restaurants, and schools were an integral part of the Southern experience in the 1960s and prior. One of the most notorious cities for discrimination within all facets of public life was Birmingham, Alabama. The focus of Martin Luther King's efforts began to shift over to the entire South and therefore steered his movement's focus there, believing it to be their best chance at instigating change (Burrow, 97). King believed that if they could "crack" Birmingham, this would be their secret to cracking all the South. It is evident why King would believe this, as Jim Crow's segregation policies had a tight grip on Birmingham. For example, Birmingham had a law that prevented "black and white children [from] playing together" (Burrow, 97). Racism also took a violent form in Birmingham. Many Black churches and homes were bombed by white citizens during this time. This happened so frequently that the city was even given the nickname "Bombingham." King was right; if Birmingham, a city characterized by racial hatred and strict segregation laws, could make policy changes, it would be possible anywhere. Due to this, the focus of the civil rights movement shifted to Birmingham.

The question would then arise: how would the people of Birmingham best implement their message of racial equality? Would they do a public transportation boycott like Montgomery? Would they organize sit-ins? It was decided by a newly-formed organization, the "Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights" (ACMHR), that the best way to challenge segregation was through a combination of, "Nonviolent direct action – marches, sit ins, jail-ins, and boycotts" (Jeter-Bennett, 2.) These demonstrations were meant to make a public statement and show the country the plight of the Southern Black experience. The goal, based on the advice of Martin Luther King, was to use non-violent tactics. The first round of their campaign, "resulted in many arrests, including King who [then] penned his powerful 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail'" (Gilmore.) At each of their protests, thousands of people were being arrested every day. Adults were apprehended, and this posed a great number of issues. They risked

missing work, or worse: losing their jobs. If they were arrested, this also created a loss of income for families. By the end of April in 1963, Martin Luther King realized that he needed a solution; otherwise, his efforts in Alabama would be a failure. According to Glenn Eskew, a history professor at Georgia State University and author of “But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle,” the number of adults “who were willing to volunteer, [and] to get arrested, had steadily dwindled those last two weeks of April and it looked like the movement was about to fall apart” (Clark.) This was because the risk that adults took when marching in these protests was too significant. The leader of the ACMHR and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) came up with an unorthodox solution; school children would be encouraged to march in place of adults, to help relieve the economic stress on Black families.

With the added stress of growing up under Jim Crow Laws, Black children were under an enormous amount of pressure in addition to the typical stresses and tribulations of growing up. Racial violence was an innate part of the Southern experience at the time, and therefore, many children had experienced or seen some sort of violence due to the color of their skin. Rose Freeman Massey outlines what it was like to be a young Black woman in Birmingham, Alabama during the 60s in the book “Foot Soldiers for Democracy: The Men, Women, and Children of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement.” She wrote about how these children were forced to take a great deal of responsibility on as young people in order to help their community. The author stated that, “If [the adults] marched, voted, or sat down at a lunch counter, they could lose their jobs or their homes. Practical reasons, therefore, led the city’s children to become a force in combating white terrorism” (Huntley XIX). This involvement was, again, crucial to the movement because without the children, efforts would have had to stop prematurely because families needed to work to support themselves.

There were many individuals who helped to shape this movement through different initiatives during this time. For example, James Bevel, a member of SCLC, was heavily involved in the creation of the idea to include school-aged children in the protests. His strategy was that if they recruited “popular teenagers from Black high schools, such as the quarterbacks and cheerleaders, [they] could influence their classmates to attend meetings with them at Black churches in Birmingham to learn about the non-violent movement” (Clark.) The efforts came to be known as the “Children’s Crusade.” During meetings in churches, the youth were told what to expect, and taught the methods used in non-violent demonstrations. Janice Kelsey, who was 15 when she attended her first meeting, recounted that, “We even saw some film strips of people who had sat at lunch counters and were spit on and pushed and all that. We were told that if you decide to participate that this is a nonviolent movement, so you [couldn’t] fight back” (Clark.) Thousands of children had been recruited and were ready to march non-violently; now, the next step was to do so.

On May 2nd, 1963 the first demonstration with children began. They demonstrated against the Birmingham Police Department and commissioner Bull Connor—the turnout was incredible (Huntley xxix). Thousands of Black youth made their way into the streets and as they marched, sang, “Don’t mind walking, ‘cause I want my freedom now” (Burrow, 116.) Nearly 40% of students at Parker High School in Birmingham were absent on this day. As expected, the children were met with violent pushback. By the end of this first day, nearly one thousand children were packed into paddy wagons and arrested. The second and third day proved to be even more violent. Children were attacked by policemen with “billy clubs, water hoses, and dogs” (Franklin, 663.) They used a brutal amount of force on the children—many of the youth

were beaten with batons and even bitten by police dogs. Despite the violence and harsh treatment, the youth continued to participate in the demonstrations for days to come, bravely putting the needs of their cause above their own safety.

The impact of these Black children at the protests was immense. The actions of the young people in Birmingham were captured on film, and these tapes were circulated around the country and the world. This quickly caused an outcry. The SCLC and ACMHR had achieved their goal; they had made their voices heard and spread their message of desegregation to the masses. While it was nowhere near instant racial equality, the film of the protests did show Americans the violent reality that many individuals in their own country were experiencing. Another victory came on May 10th, when Martin Luther King Jr and the white business community reached an agreement. The desegregation “of downtown lunch counters [and] the removal of signs designated ‘colored’ and ‘white’” began. (Huntley xxxi). Although, the mayor of Birmingham called this agreement “hogwash,” signaling that white objection to the agreement was present. Despite this criticism, the achievement's impact was still meaningful. The film showed for the first time that the city of Birmingham was willing to make changes in the structure of their community. On May 12th, 1963, the New York Times wrote that this agreement was “The most significant victory in the deep South” and that it had the chance to determine where the “race struggle in the United States [was] heading” (The New York Times, 1). Like the Times stated, this victory was very significant, and without young children's involvement, it would not have been possible. They allowed the fight to continue longer than it ever would have otherwise and were a symbol of the generational oppression that Black Americans faced

The demonstrations that took place in Birmingham in 1963 were a turning point in the Civil Rights movement as a whole. They brought the fight for racial equality to the eyes of many Americans and were a significant achievement in the movement. The victory would not have been possible without the involvement of Black schoolchildren. These children allowed their families to have the economic freedom to support themselves so that the fight for justice did not end prematurely. Without these children, the efforts in Birmingham would have ceased before any significant progress was made, and it would not be the success story that we hear about today.

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