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THE DETROIT RIOTERS AND LOOTERS COMMITTED TO PRISON

Elmer R. Akers and Vernon Fox

The authors of this paper who are respectively, the Sociologist and Psychologist, on the staff of the Southern Michigan prison at Jackson, are reporting the results of their studies of the Detroit rioters who have been committed to the State Prison. The riot itself appears to be not simply a symptom of race feeling.—Editor.

Race riots have occurred many times in the United States, but the conviction and sentence to prison of a hundred and more of the participants is unprecedented in its volume. On March 9, 1944, we had received in the State Prison of Southern Michigan at Jackson 105 of the defendants who had been tried on charges growing out of the Detroit race riot of June 21-22, 1943. Others are still being tried or are awaiting trial.

Already there have been written several reams concerning the race riot in Detroit. Newspaper and magazine articles, editorials, pamphlets, surveys of opinion, reports of lawyers' and other associations, and reports by psychiatrists, police commissions, and various city officials have been published. Probably the most important publication has been a small book by Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey of Wayne University.¹ This volume contains a rather objective journalistic report and sociological interpretation of the riot.

The present article is concerned, not with the Detroit race riot itself, but with that group of men convicted of felonies and incarcerated in State Prison as a result of it. The investigators are interested in the social and psychological background and equipment of the men that induced them to participate in activities connected with mass race violence, and for which they were convicted of felonies. As far as the writers can discover, this particular phase has not heretofore been attacked.

Method of Procedure

The records of the State Prison of Southern Michigan were used as the source of data. These records include with regard to each man the Michigan State Police report, a copy of the Court's Indeterminate Sentence Record, Probation Officer's report, educational and psychological examinations, medical report, and a social history. In some cases, these records are supplemented by letters from the man's relatives, former employers, from schools he has attended and from institutions both penal and eleemosynary which have had contact with the prisoner himself and with other members of his family.

All of the men who were sentenced to prison for crimes directly connected with the Detroit race riot were studied and the records

compiled on them were the source of the data used in this paper. There were ninety-seven Negroes and eight white men in the group,¹ a total of 105 cases. As will be pointed out in greater detail later in the paper, the majority of this group were not rioters as such, but looters and carriers of concealed weapons. Most of the actual rioters, the participants in acts of violence, were convicted on charges of assault and battery, disorderly conduct, and/or other misdemeanors. These misdemeanants, or active rioters, were in the main sentenced to the Detroit House of Correction for periods varying from thirty to ninety days. Although there were thirteen perpetrators of violent crimes sent to prison, only three were actually charged with rioting. For purposes of this study, however, the group of men convicted for crimes directly connected with the riot are hereafter called the riot group.

It was noted that each man in the riot group had been tried and sentenced at Recorder's Court in Detroit. A control group of ninety-seven Negroes and eight white men was selected at random from the men received at the State Prison of Southern Michigan from Recorder's Court during the months of May and June, 1943, immediately preceding the riot. Frequency distributions were set up for the riot group and the control group on the basis of age of offenders, intelligence quotient, nativity and length of residence in Michigan, grade placement in school as indicated by individual results on the New Stanford Achievement Test, history of drug addiction, and venereal condition. Statistical analyses were made on each of these sets of distributions. Further analyses were made of the riot group alone on the basis of industrial skill, marital status, previous criminal record, and the specific crimes for which the men were convicted.

Nativity

Only fourteen of the riot group were born in the State of Michigan, and but twenty-one of the control group were born in this state. Thirteen of the rioters had lived in Michigan less than one year, eleven less than two years, 14 had been in this state from three to four years, thirteen others had been here from five to 10 years, and 40 had been here 11 years or more. The states contributing most heavily to the riot group were, in descending order of importance, the following:

Georgia, 22; Alabama, 18; Michigan, 14; Tennessee, 11; Mississippi, 8; total of all other states, 32; grand total, 105.

A statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant difference between the riot and control groups as to whether the men were natives of Michigan or from other states. Most of the men in both the riot and control groups had come from other

¹A similar disproportion occurred in the Chicago race riot of 1919. See the report of the Chicago Commission of Race Relations; *The Negro in Chicago*, 1922.

states. The mean length of residence in Michigan of the non-native riot and control groups were 10.6 ± 0.9 and 12.0 ± 0.9 respectively. A critical ratio of 0.3 indicates that no significant difference exists between the two groups of men as to their length of residence in Michigan.

Tabulation and analysis of members of the riot and control groups as to whether they were natives of southern states or northern states yielded rather interesting results. The Mason and Dixon line was selected as a rough dividing line between the northern and southern states. The following table may be helpful in visualizing the differences in nativity of the two groups:

<i>Nativity</i>	<i>Riot Group</i>		<i>Control Group</i>	
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>Observed</i>	<i>Expected</i>	<i>Observed</i>
Natives of Northern States.....	24	16	24	32
Natives of Southern States.....	81	89	81	73

The chi-square test indicates that a difference exists that reaches the one per cent level of significance. Therefore, a significantly larger group of men in the riot group than would be expected were natives of the southern states.

Age

The mean age of the riot group was found to be 28.2 ± 0.9 , as compared with 26.7 ± 0.9 for the control group. A critical ratio of 3.6 between the distribution indicates that the riot group is significantly older than the control group. Lee and Humphrey indicates that ". . . it is well to remember that those hurt and those arrested were probably the less agile persons and, in most cases therefore, not as young as those who got away".² On the other hand, it is known that persons convicted of individual assaultive crimes, including sex assaults, are on the average significantly older than those convicted for all other crimes.³ The investigators have no substantial evidence at this time to prove that a difference in age exists between participants in individual assault and in mob violence. The group that was imprisoned as a result of the riot were, as has been mentioned before, generally not those who actually participated in assault, but the looters, and those convicted of carrying concealed weapons. Burglary and concealed weapons have been found to be crimes of younger men.⁴ It is not unexpected, then, to find that the group of men convicted of looting and weapons charges resulting from the riot are significantly younger than the control group.

²Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Humphrey; *Race Riot*, 1943, p. 83.

³Vernon Fox; "Intelligence, Race, and Age as Selective Factors in Crime," 1943, an unpublished report to Michigan's Director of Corrections, p. 18.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

Intelligence

The mean intelligence quotient of the riot group is 81.0 ± 0.6 . This is very significantly below the mean of intelligence quotient of 83.8 ± 0.8 of the control group, as is evidenced by the critical ratio of 7.3. Both groups are very significantly below the prison population mean of 87.7 ± 0.1 . The intellectual classifications⁵ of the rioters and control group are as follows:

<i>Classification</i>	<i>Riot Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Very superior	0	0
Superior	2	3
Average	21	24
Dull	23	29
Borderline defective	40	37
Feeble-minded	19	12

Academic Grade Placement

According to the results of the New Stanford Achievement Test, Form D, the mean average grade placement of the riot group was 4.3 ± 0.3 . The mean average grade placement of the control group was found to be 5.2 ± 0.2 . The critical ratio of 4.4 between these distributions indicates that the riot group is significantly inferior to the control group as to education.

Venereal Condition

Statistical analysis indicates that the venereal condition of the members of the riot group was not significantly different from that of the control group. In this instance data was available for only ninety-seven of the riot group and one hundred and four of the control group. The following table may be helpful in visualizing the similarity between the two groups:

<i>Venereal Condition</i>	<i>Riot Group</i>		<i>Control Group</i>	
	<i>Expected</i>	<i>Observed</i>	<i>Expected</i>	<i>Observed</i>
Negative	52.1	51	55.9	57
History of Syphilis..	10.6	14	11.4	8
History of Gonorrhoea	14.9	12	16.1	19
Active Syphilis.....	15.5	16	16.5	16
Active Gonorrhoea ...	3.9	4	4.1	4
	97.0	97	104.0	104

Thus, a little less than half the men in each group were luetic upon admission to prison, or had a history of venereal disease.

Drug Addiction

Although all the individuals of both groups denied addiction to drugs at this time, prison records indicate a history of drug addiction in some cases. Four members of the riot group and five of the control group had a history of drug addiction on their

⁵Classification of intelligence quotients according to Frank N. Freeman; *Mental Tests*, 1939, p. 103.

records. Here, of course, a significant difference does not exist.

Further Description of Riot Group

Of the riot group, ninety-seven were vocationally unskilled. Eight could be called semi-skilled. There was not a skilled worker in the group. Twenty-nine of the men were unemployed at the time of the riot, despite the fact that war industry at that time was able to use all available manpower. Very few of these unemployed men had been out of work for more than a few days, a situation which suggests that the riot group represents an area of society where a high motility of labor exists. Only fourteen men had been on only one job during the year prior to the riot; as mentioned above, twenty-nine were unemployed at the time of the riot; the remaining sixty-two had been on their jobs for periods ranging from a few days to several months, but none had been employed at one place for a year. Vocational instability or a high motility of unskilled labor was the rule.

The marital status of the riot group is as follows:

Common-law relationship, 41; single, 34; married by ceremony, 19; separated, 8; divorced, 3.

The high proportion of common-law relationships is not entirely unexpected, since the larger proportion of the riot group are southern Negroes. This group of people includes a large number who have continued the more primitive conjugal union which was general in slavery days, but now may represent cultural lag.

It is noteworthy that only twenty-seven of the riot group had had no previous police record. Twenty-three had had only jail records. Sixteen others had been convicted of felonies and had been given probation or suspended sentences. Twenty-three had served prison terms; fifteen of this number had had but one previous incarceration, four had been imprisoned twice, three had been sentenced three times previously, and one had had four previous prison terms and is wanted by the Alabama State Penitentiary for escaping. Sixteen of the men with previous police records had also been subjected to juvenile institutionalization. Seventy-four per cent of the rioters, then, had previously been in conflict with law-enforcing agencies.

Earlier in this paper it was mentioned that the majority of the men convicted of felonies as a result of the Detroit race riot were not rioters as such, but looters and carriers of concealed weapons. The crimes for which the men were sentenced, together with the number of offenders in each category are as follows:

<i>Crime</i>	<i>Number of Men</i>
Entering without breaking in the daytime.....	38
Carrying concealed weapons.....	37
Larceny from a store.....	16
Felonious assault	4

Rioting	3
Resisting arrest	2
Larceny of an automobile.....	1
Malicious destruction of property.....	1
Robbery armed	1
Negligent homicide	1
Manslaughter	1
	<hr/>
Total	105

It will be noticed that thirteen of the crimes, including robbery armed, may be considered violent ones. Ninety-two of the men were convicted of relatively non-violent crimes, such as stealing small articles from a store or walking into it after the windows had been broken by a prospective misdemeanant. Thirty-seven were convicted of carrying concealed weapons. Many of these men said they were convicted of carrying knives that they habitually carried, but for which they had never before been arrested. At any rate, an unexpectedly small proportion of men were imprisoned for actual and active rioting.

Summary

In summary, the following conclusions may be drawn with regard to the men who were imprisoned for felonies directly connected with the Detroit race riot:

1. The men convicted of felonies as a result of the riot were disproportionately from states south of the Mason and Dixon
2. The mean age of the riot group was significantly older than the control group.
3. The riot group was very significantly inferior to the control group with regard to general intelligence.
4. The riot group was educationally inferior to the control group.
5. There was no significant difference between the riot group and control group with regard to venereal condition.
6. No significant difference with regard to history of drug addiction existed between the two groups.
7. The riot group were in the main unskilled workers with high vocational motility.
8. The riot group has a very high proportion of common-law relationships.
9. Seventy-four per cent of the riot group had previously been in conflict with the law-enforcing agencies. Twenty-three of this number had prison records.
10. Most of the men sentenced to prison for crimes directly connected with the riot were looters and carriers of concealed weapons, and not for active and violent participation in the riot. Only thirteen men were sentenced for violent crimes.