Long Time Coming: Miami's Liberty City Riot of 1968

by ERIC TSCHESCHLOK

I N 1898, Josiah Strong predicted that "the problem of the twen-
tieth century will be the city." Five years later, W. E. B. Du Bois
declared that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem
of the color line."[1] The turbulent 1960s proved both men pro-
phetic: from Newark to Los Angeles, the nation's black communi-
ties erupted in violence and destruction. For much of the decade,
Dade County, Florida escaped this pattern of violence. But in Au-
gust 1968, as the Republican national convention took place in Mi-
ami Beach, the Miami ghetto community of Liberty City erupted
into several days of rioting.[2]

The conditions that gave rise to the disorder—discrimination,
proscription, and segregation—had been commonplace in Miami
since its incorporation in 1896. Jim Crow ordinances segregated
public facilities and consigned blacks to a congested "Colored
Town." Known later as the Central Negro District and today as
Overtown, that section was characterized by crowded slum hous-
ing. Police brutality was commonplace until the 1940s, and the Ku
Klux Klan remained an active enforcer of the color line until the
1950s.[3]

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1. Josiah Strong, *The Twentieth Century City* (New York, 1898), 53; W. E. B. Du Bois,
   The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago, 1903), 10.
2. For the 1960s ghetto riots generally, see Robert M. Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A
   Study of Riots and Ghettos* (Garden City, NY, 1971); Joe R. Feagin and Harlan
   Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities* (New York, 1973);
   David Boesel and Peter H. Rossi, eds., *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto
   Riots, 1964-1968* (New York, 1971); Robert H. Connery, ed., *Urban Riots: Violence
   and Social Change* (New York, 1969); Louis H. Masotti and Don R. Bowen, eds.,
   Riots and Rebellion: Civil Violence in the Urban Community (Beverly Hills, CA, 1968);
   Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, IN,
   1987), 187-213.
3. Paul S. George, "Colored Town: Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930" *Florida
   Historical Quarterly* 56 (April 1978), 432-447; Paul S. George, "Policing Miami's
   Black Community, 1896-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (April 1979), 434-
   450; Raymond A. Mohl, "The Pattern of Race Relations in Miami since the
   1920s," in David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers, eds., *The African American Her-
   itage of Florida* (Gainesville, 1995), 326-365.

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By 1940, some African Americans had moved into housing sites beyond the confines of Colored Town. A few hundred lived in Brownsville, just outside the city limits, a few miles west and north of downtown Miami. Others settled in and around Liberty Square, a public housing project built for blacks in 1937 five miles northwest of the central city. In the 1930s and 1940s, city planners and private developers pursued a variety of plans to make these distant communities the primary locus of minority housing for Miami, but they rarely progressed beyond the drawing board. As a result, Miami's northwest black sections grew somewhat haphazardly into the 1950s. In its early stages, in fact, Liberty Square was a small, semi-suburban community where many African American families owned their own homes.[4]

This changed with the advent of the interstate highway system in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In communities throughout Florida, politicians, urban planners, and entrepreneurs all welcomed the interstate road system as an economic boon. They also envisioned highway construction as a convenient slum-razing method. Consequently, the Florida SRD routed the downtown-Miami leg of Interstate-95 through the Central Negro District. As freeway building intensified in the early 1960s, many ramshackle neighborhoods were eliminated from the city's core. This created a severe crisis for the downtown black community. As the I-95 right-of-way tore through Overtown, thousands of black housing units and the entire black business district were destroyed. By the end of the decade, expressway construction and related urban renewal activities had displaced about half of Overtown's 36,000 inhabitants.[5]

Unfortunately, state and municipal authorities made little provision for the resettlement of Overtown's uprooted occupants. Ul-

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4. Raymond A. Mohl, "Trouble in Paradise: Race and Housing in Miami during the New Deal Era," *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives* 19 (Spring 1987), 7-21; Raymond A. Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto in Metropolitan Miami, 1940-1960," *Journal of Urban History* 21 (March 1995), 395-427; Paul S. George and Thomas K. Peterson, "Liberty Square, 1933-1937: The Origins and Evolution of a Public Housing Project," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 49 (1988), 53-68; James E. Scott, "Miami's Liberty Square Project," *The Crisis* 49 (March 1942), 87-88; *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968.

5. Raymond A. Mohl, "Race and Space in the Modern City: Interstate-95 and the Black Community in Miami," in Arnold R. Hirsch and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *Urban Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), 100-158; *Miami News*, September 10, 1971.

timately, most central-city refugees relocated to the newer
northwest black sections. The Liberty Square settlement was trans-
formed into a burgeoning black ghetto known as Liberty City.[6]

Amid the ingress of Overtown's displanted populace, Liberty
City's boundaries were extended into adjoining white communi-
ties. The resulting "white flight" allowed Liberty City to expand be-
yond Miami's city limits into unincorporated Dade County. There,
it merged with the Brownsville Negro district to form a nearly con-
tiguous belt of black residences in Miami's northwest quadrant. By
1965, Liberty City had become the nucleus of a 15-square-mile
black corridor stretching from Brownsville to Opa-locka on the dis-
tant northwest fringes of the metropolitan area. And, as late as
1968, this sector continued to spread at the rate of a block and a
half per week.[7]

Under these circumstances, Liberty City's suburban character
quickly succumbed to urban decay. Soon the area's open spaces
and single-family dwellings gave way to multilevel apartment com-
plexes with high densities and few comforts. As one black Miamian
observed, the sustained inrush of Overtown's displaced residents
contributed to the overcrowding and slum conditions in Liberty
City, effacing what was once an "area of upward mobility." Another
South Floridian bemoaned the transformation of the northwest
area from "one of the newest and nicest sections of Miami" into a
tumble-down quarter that was "dieing [sic] block by block." Re-
flecting on the fate of Liberty City in 1969, the Miami Study Team
of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Vio-
lence noted simply that sweeping changes in the 1950s and 1960s
"destroyed the original [Liberty Square] concept of a more civi-
lized and liveable low-cost housing area."[8]

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6. Mohl, "Race and Space," 100-158; Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto," 401-402,
   415-416.
7. Harold M. Rose, "Metropolitan Miami's Changing Negro Population, 1950-
   1960," *Economic Geography* 40 (July 1964), 225-226; Mohl, "Race and Space," 129-
   134; Mohl, "Making the Second Ghetto," 395-427; *Miami Herald,* August 9, 1968.
8. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil
   Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), 650-651; G. F.
   Sirman to Farris Bryant, July 9, 1963, Farris Bryant Papers, Record Group 102,
   Series 756, Box 101, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee; National Commission
   on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, *Miami Report: The Report of the Miami
   Study Team on Civil Disturbances in Miami, Florida during the Week of August 5, 1968*
   (Washington, DC, 1969), 1 (hereinafter *Miami Report*).

With a population of 45,000 by 1968, Liberty City easily qualified as Miami's largest and most congested section.[9] More than a decade of social disruption had produced an unstable and potentially explosive climate there. Such volatility required only a spark to ignite a major conflagration. The Republican national convention of 1968 provided the setting, and a tragic turn of events caused the fatal spark.

Racial tensions were mounting even before the GOP convention commenced on August 5. In July, independent presidential aspirant George Wallace visited Miami to promote his segregationist and racist campaign. To the dismay of African American residents, the Alabama governor attracted throngs of enthusiastic white supporters.[10] Miami's black citizenry was also offended by the dearth of black representation at the Republican convention. Several local civil rights groups met the day before the convention to plan a rally protesting the "lily-white" policies of the Grand Old Party. Scheduled for Wednesday, August 7, this gathering also afforded the black community the opportunity to express African American demands and grievances at a time when Miami was the focus of nationwide attention.[11]

For the next three days, protest organizers circulated handbills publicizing the August 7 rally, to be held at the Vote Power headquarters on Northwest 62nd Street, Liberty City's main thoroughfare. The flyers advertised an impressive array of scheduled speakers, including basketball superstar Wilt Chamberlain and Ralph D. Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As community leaders had hoped, an audience of about 200 people gathered at the Vote Power building on Wednesday afternoon to hear Abernathy and Wilt "the Stilt" speak. When these celebrities failed to arrive, the crowd grew restless and unruly.[12]

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9. *Miami Report*, 1.
10. *Miami Times*, August 2, 1968.
11. *Miami Report*, 6-7; *Miami Herald*, August 11, 1968.
12. *Miami Report*, 7-9; John Boone and William Farmar, "Violence in Miami: One More Warning," *New South* 23 (Fall 1968), 28. Ralph Abernathy and Wilt Chamberlain were not scheduled to speak until the close of the rally. However, as this fact was not mentioned in any handbills or flyers, many blacks arrived at the meeting early, expecting to see these celebrities already there.

A tense situation occurred about 1:00 p.m. when white report-
ers attempted to attend the "Blacks Only" meeting. Most of the
newsmen left upon request, but one refused to do so and was forc-
ibly ejected. This incident elicited little response from the crowd,
but it attracted the attention of the police, who were already pre-
pared for trouble during the Republican convention. Responding
to reports that the "white media were rejected, violently, from the
meeting," Miami police dispatched a heavily-armed detail to the
scene.[13]

The large police presence only exacerbated tensions. After ex-
changing insults with the officers, disgruntled youths began hurl-
ing stones at passing motorists. Despite intermittent "crowd
control problems," though, police maintained relative order until
early evening. Then, a disturbance erupted when a white man in a
car with a "Wallace for President" bumper sticker attempted to
drive through the area. As he passed the Vote Power building,
rocks and bottles rained down upon his car, causing him to crash
into another automobile. Amid cries of "Get Whitey," the driver
abandoned his vehicle and fled on foot. Within minutes, a group of
young blacks overturned the car and set it ablaze.[14]

For the next several hours, some 300 rioters ransacked and
looted the shops along 62nd Street, targeting white-owned busi-
nesses. Looting and arson continued sporadically through the
night, interrupted at times by bursts of police tear gas. By 10:00
p.m., local officials, with Ralph Abernathy and Florida Governor
Claude Kirk, had arrived in Liberty City hoping to end the vio-
lence. After a brief meeting with neighborhood spokesmen, Kirk
and the other officials agreed to return the next morning to con-
tinue discussions.[15]

Liberty City remained tense, but peaceful, as 300 spectators
congregated outside the Community Council offices on Thursday

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13. Capt. Leo R. Joffre, "Operational Report of Civil Disturbances," August 13,
    1968, Dade County/Miami Riot Files, Robert Graham Papers, Record Group
    104, Series 889, Box 3, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee (hereinafter Miami
    Riot Files, Graham Papers); *Miami Report*, 9.
14. *Miami News*, August 8, 1968; Joffre, "Operational Report," Miami Riot Files, Gra-
    ham Papers, Box 3; *Miami Report*, 10-11; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in
    Miami," 29.
15. Joffre, "Operational Report," Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3; *Miami
    Report*, 13-14; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 29-30.

morning to await the arrival of the white officials. They never came.
Instead, Kirk and the municipal authorities sent emissaries. The
Council members refused to receive these substitute messengers.
As news of the canceled conference reached the streets, pandemo-
nium ensued. Injuries and property damage increased sharply. A
few black leaders appealed for calm and order, but their cries were
drowned by scores of voices chanting "we can't wait."[16]

As the mob grew to about 1,000 people by mid-afternoon, Mi-
ami police asked the Florida Highway Patrol for assistance.
Equipped with a special riot van, 75 state troopers responded
quickly. A modified version of an insect-control machine, the riot
truck sprayed the area with a tear gas fog which briefly cleared the
streets. As the crowd reassembled, Miami police fired a volley into
an alley from which they thought a sniper was shooting. When the
gunfire ceased, two residents were dead, and a teen-aged boy had
been severely wounded. The police found no weapons in the vicin-
ity. Later that night, Miami lawmen shot and killed a third un-
armed "sniper."[17]

Shortly after the first shooting, Governor Kirk mobilized a reg-
iment of National Guardsmen and placed it at the disposal of Dade
County Sheriff E. Wilson Purdy, who had just taken charge of riot
control. Purdy assembled 800 militiamen and 200 sheriff's deputies
into two wings. Each was positioned at opposite ends of the distur-
bance zone, from which points they marched toward each other
along 62nd Street, dispersing the crowd as they proceeded. Within
about two hours, the two forces met in downtown Liberty City.
Quiet prevailed for the remainder of the evening. Miami's first ra-
cial disorder had run its course.[18]

Three Miamians had lost their lives and dozens more were se-
riously hurt. On Thursday night alone, the emergency room at
Jackson Memorial Hospital treated 32 persons for injuries, includ-
ing six for gun-shot wounds. Police had made nearly 200 arrests,

16. *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968; *Miami Report*, 15.
17. Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 30; Lt. J. H. Knight, "Critique on Riot,"
    August 21, 1968, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3; *Miami Herald*, August
    9, 1968; *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968.
18. *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968; *Miami Report*, 17-21; Boone and Farmar, "Violence
    in Miami," 31; Paul S. Salter and Robert C. Mings, "A Geographic Aspect of the
    1968 Miami Racial Disturbance," *Professional Geographer* 21 (March 1969), 84.

and Liberty City remained under martial law for the next four days.[19]

Miami's political leaders, as well as white citizens generally, had difficulty coming to grips with the uprising in Liberty City. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 1965, Miami was taking "pride" in the fact that "there has never been a major race clash here." Because of this record, most white Miamians pictured the black community as complacent and content. Even after the riot, civic authorities insisted that local blacks did not "really want to get in the street and cause trouble." Hence, many public officials ascribed the breach of peace to "outside agitators." Likewise, a county grand jury investigation described Miami's pre-riot race relations as "relatively good," detecting "no prior warning of trouble." But as local newscaster Ralph Renick observed, such rationalizations shed little light on the true problem. Rather, they revealed an official unwillingness to "probe" and "correct" the "causative factors leading to the riot."[20]

Unlike Miami officialdom, Miami's black community was not surprised by what happened. "All the reasons and conditions that cause the violence are there," affirmed one black leader. And, as most blacks understood, the preconditions for unrest took root far earlier than the summer of 1968. The uproar "just didn't start last night," observed one Liberty City youngster; "it started 50 years ago." Other citizens expressed amazement that civil strife had not occurred sooner. As the city's black newsweekly, the *Miami Times*, explained: "The riot last week came as no surprise to us. It should not have surprised any of you either, if you had only looked around you and seen the results of social injustice and inequality, surely you would have seen the disturbance coming too."[21]

The *Times* editorial spoke eloquently to the fundamental causes of the Liberty City uprising. As in other inner-city communities, Miami's ghetto revolt was a manifestation of black rage against

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19. *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968; *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968.
20. Neil Maxwell, "New Influx of Cubans Faces Cool Reception from Many Miamians," *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1965; *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968; *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968; "Report of the Spring Term 1968 Dade County Grand Jury," November 12, 1968, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3; Ralph Renick, "Griping When There Should Be Thinking," WTVJ Channel 4 news editorial, February 12, 1969, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3.
21. *Miami Herald*, August 9, 10, 1968; *Miami Times*, August 16, 23, 1968.

the institutionalized forms of white racism. As the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders concluded in the 1968 Kerner Report, these white-over-black controls, embodied in the institution of the ghetto, inhibited black access to the "American Dream," creating a volatile atmosphere of anger and alienation in core-city communities across the country.[22]

Small wonder, then, many African Americans considered the ghetto a tool of racial oppression, condoned and perpetuated by an exploitative white power structure. "Exploiters come into the ghetto from outside," wrote two Black Power advocates in 1967, "bleed it dry, and leave it economically dependent upon the larger society." Speaking to a black audience a few years earlier, Malcolm X delivered a similar message: "The white man controls his own school, his own bank, his own economy, his own politics, his own everything, his own community—but he also controls yours."[23] In large measure, therefore, the 1960s ghetto revolts represented attempts by African Americans to end white exploitation of their resources by demanding "black power" in black communities. Black residents sought greater control over the institutions that affected their lives.[24]

Liberty City blacks shared the desire for community control. The top demand printed in flyers promoting the August 7 Vote Power rally was: "Black Control of Black Ghetto—Politically, Economically, Educationally." Likewise, after more turmoil in 1970, activist Al Featherstone insisted, "black people must have more say-so as to what goes on in the black community." Thus as both the *Mi-*

22. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, 1968), 203-205 (hereinafter Kerner Report).
23. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York, 1967), 16-32, 146-177, quotation on 17; George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York, 1965), 42. See also Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York, 1965); William K. Tabb, *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto* (New York, 1970).
24. Feagin and Hahn, *Ghetto Revolts*, 299-317; Fogelson, *Violence as Protest*, 101, 136, 141, 146, 171-181, 185; Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, 186-213; David O. Sears and Paul B. McConahay, *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot* (Boston, 1973); Marilyn Gittel, "Community Control of Education," in Connery, ed., *Urban Riots*, 60-71; Stephen M. David, "Leadership of the Poor in Poverty Programs," in ibid., 86-100.

ami Times and the *Miami Herald* surmised, the Liberty City riot was largely a call for "the white man to get out of the ghetto."[25]

This demand was most vehement in the economic sphere. Since few blacks owned property, most rented living space from white landlords. Thus, according to Liberty City Community Council founder Bernard Dyer, 92 percent of all rent receipts collected in Liberty City went to absentee white property holders, some of whom lived as far away as New York and Philadelphia. Millions of dollars in rent, therefore, left Miami's black neighborhoods annually. One aim of the community control movement therefore was the retention of these monies in the local economy.[26]

Not only were rents paid to absentee landlords, but they were also excessive. Miami blacks, observed the Dade County Community Relations Board in 1867, paid "more for rent than any other group in the city." Bernard Dyer spoke for many ghetto residents when he lambasted white slumlords as "profiteers" who "operate housing at a rip-off rate that staggers the imagination." Neal Adams of the Brownsville Improvement Association seconded this criticism, asserting that "often tenants find themselves in the clutches of unscrupulous and money-hungry landlords who give little in the way of accommodations and facilities, but exact much in the way of rent."[27] Additionally, white landlords routinely neglected to make repairs to their properties, evicted tenants without formal notice, and discontinued water and power services to apartments whose

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25. *Miami Report*, Appendix IV; Al Featherstone, testimony before Florida Commission on Human Relations, public hearing in re "Miami Crisis" of June 13-19, 1970, Miami, Florida, July 1, 1970, p. 3, Files of the Florida Commission on Human Relations, Record Group 891, Series 382, Box 1, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee (hereinafter FCHR Files); *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968; *Miami Herald*, August 11, 1968.
26. "Statement of Bernard J. Dyer," *Oversight of Federal Housing and Community Development Plans in the State of Florida*, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Housing of the Committee on Banking and Currency, House of Representatives, 92nd Congress, First Session, Miami, FL, October 8, 1971 (Washington, DC, 1971), 218-219 (hereinafter Hearing on Housing Oversights).
27. Dade County Community Relations Board, minutes, March 2, 1967, Elizabeth L. Virrick Papers, Box 2, Historical Association of Southern Florida, Miami (hereinafter Virrick Papers); "Statement of Bernard J. Dyer," Hearing on Housing Oversights, 217; "Statement of Neal Adams," Hearing on Housing Oversights, 212-213.

tenants owed back rent. Through their exploitative practices, Miami slumlords helped cast the mold for the 1968 uprising.[28]

The paucity of black-owned enterprises further evidenced the lack of community control in black Miami. Al Featherstone noted in 1970 that whites owned 97 percent of the businesses in Miami's black community.[29] These entrepreneurs also carried their profits back to suburbia. Not surprisingly, complaints about white commercial dominance in Liberty City ranked high among those aired during the 1968 disorder. "You got 30 liquor stores in this Negro section," one youth said, "and not a single black man owns one." "Tell Whitey to stop taking money out of the neighborhood," admonished another youngster, while a third resident affirmed simply, "the white man runs it all." One African American who took no part in the riot demanded: "Give us power in the black community. We're not going to stone something we own."[30]

In addition, white vendors frequently charged black patrons exorbitant prices for low-grade merchandise; and resentment to such gouging ran deep. In 1970, for instance, a "rotten meat" riot erupted in Brownsville following black protests against white grocers who sold rancid foodstuffs at inflated prices. Merchant malpractice had also figured prominently in the 1968 outburst. As a *Miami Times* columnist opined in the wake of the earlier disorder, white retailers made revolt all but inevitable when they "charged 23 cents for a 15 cent item . . . charged unrealistic rates . . . demanded quality prices for inferior products." It was no coincidence that white-owned businesses bore the brunt of the damage caused by the Liberty City riot.[31]

Aside from consumer exploitation and the lack of economic self-sufficiency, the two most critical problems facing Miami's black communities concerned housing and employment.[32] With respect to the former, most Miami blacks endured wretched living arrange-

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28. Philip Meyer et al., *Miami Negroes: A Study in Depth* (Miami, 1968), 18, 22-23, 52; Al Featherstone, testimony in re "Miami Crisis," p. 3, FCHR Files, Box 1; Citizens' Advisory Committee of the City of Miami, minutes, September 13, October 11, 1966, Virrick Papers, Box 2.

29. Al Featherstone, testimony re "Miami Crisis," p. 4, FCHR Files, Box 1.

30. *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968.

31. *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968; Meyer, *Miami Negroes*, 22, 53; Bruce Porter and Marvin Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980: Crossing the Bounds* (Lexington, MA, 1984), 17-18.

32. Dade County Community Relations Board, minutes, March 2, 1967, Virrick Papers, Box 2; *Miami Times*, August 16, 23, 1968.

ments. Around mid-century, for example, both city and county planning authorities found that half the local African American population resided in below-standard accommodations. In 1951, two University of Miami economists concluded that, despite some postwar housing gains, one quarter of the city's black populace remained "as ill-housed as it was ten and twenty years ago." Moreover, these researchers envisaged a further decline in the housing situation.[33]

Indeed, during the next two decades, poor living standards continued in Miami's disadvantaged urban households. In the mid-1950s, national and local Urban League reports and a *Miami Herald* series on slums all confirmed the pervasive and worsening nature of slum housing conditions in black Miami.[34] Another Urban League study in 1962 showed the housing of metropolitan blacks to be twice as overcrowded and ten times more dilapidated than that of whites. Not surprisingly, respondents to a 1968 *Miami Herald* survey of black attitudes and grievances consistently cited inferior and crowded living quarters as their primary social concern. Conditions were particularly horrendous in the city's Central Negro District, where many residents still lived in cold-water flats or in disintegrating shotgun shacks, which the *Miami Times* labeled "unfit for human habitation."[35]

Most Dade County blacks, however, lived in high rise concrete block apartment houses. In the Liberty City-Brownsville-Opa-locka corridor these buildings sprang up swiftly in the 1950s and 1960s in order to accommodate the thousands of central city urbanites uprooted by slum clearance and expressway building. While the apartment house construction served a crucial need, the new domiciles scarcely upgraded the social environment in Miami's northwest black sections.

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33. Miami Planning Board, *Dwelling Conditions in the Two Principal Blighted Areas: Miami, Florida* (Miami, 1949), 67; Dade County Planning Board, *Survey of Negro Areas* (Miami, 1951), 75; Reinhold P. Wolff and David K Gillogly, *Negro Housing in the Miami Area: Effects of the Postwar Building Boom* (Coral Gables, 1951), 3-15, quotation on 14.
34. Warren M. Banner, *An Appraisal of Progress, 1943-1953* (New York, 1953), 20-34; H. Daniel Lang, *Food, Clothing, and Shelter: An Analysis of the Housing Market of the Negro Group in Dade County* (Miami, 1954); Lawrence Thompson, series on slums in the Miami area, *Miami Herald,* December 11-18, 1955.
35. James W. Morrison, *The Negro in Greater Miami* (Miami, 1962), 6-12; Meyer, *Miami Negroes,* 4, 13, 16, 18, 22-23, 40; *Miami Times,* August 9, 16, 1968.

Erected hastily for profit, Liberty City apartment projects revealed defective construction and fell rapidly into disrepair. Not only were the apartments overcrowded, but the subdivisions usually had no amenities such as playgrounds, open space, or recreational facilities. Black neighborhoods also suffered from want of municipal services. Infrequent garbage collection, for example, allowed refuse to accumulate, adding to the unsightliness of the blight-ravaged tenements. As late as 1967, residents in sections of Liberty City and Brownsville were still trying to obtain adequate street lighting and city water. As local civic activist and fair-housing crusader Elizabeth L. Virrick noted in 1960, apartment building in black Miami sometimes "intensified rather than relieved slum conditions."[36]

In addition to their physical shortcomings, Miami's black housing developments were also severely overcrowded. In 1954, the Greater Miami Urban League discovered that population densities in black areas of Dade County averaged 150 persons per residential acre as compared with the overall metropolitan ratio of 12 persons per acre. At the end of the decade, a county-wide human rights audit sponsored by more than a dozen Greater Miami civic groups reported no change in these statistics.[37] Further, studies by the Welfare Planning Council of Dade County bolstered voluminous individual complaints that congested residential conditions probably worsened in the 1960s. Crowding in some black households was so acute that families slept in shifts, with the "day sleepers" on the streets at night and the "night sleepers" outside during the day.[38]

The clustering of metropolitan blacks into slum neighborhoods had deleterious social repercussions. As a local housing reformer avowed in 1961, "lives filled with lust, filth and crime"

36. Elizabeth L. Virrick, "New Housing for Negroes in Dade County, Florida," in Nathan Glazer and Davis McEntire, eds., Studies in Housing & Minority Groups (Berkeley, 1960), 137-143, quotation on 143; Wolff and Gillogly, Negro Housing in the Miami Area, 8, 11, 13-15; Morrison, The Negro in Greater Miami, 6-12; Miami Herald, August 9, 1968; Economic Opportunity Program, Inc. of Dade County, "CAP Narrative Progress Report," 1967, Virrick Papers, Box 3.
37. Lang, Food, Clothing, and Shelter, 35; American Civil Liberties Union of Greater Miami et al., "Tenth Anniversary Universal Declaration of Human Rights," December 10, 1958, pamphlet, Records of the Governor's Advisory Commission on Race Relations, Record Group 100, Series 226, Box 8, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.
38. Richard S. Sterne Social Problem Levels in the City of Miami, (Miami, 1965), 57-61, 68-71; Meyer, Miami Negroes, 4, 22, 40; "Statement of Neal Adams," Hearing on Housing Oversights, 211.

represented the inevitable "lot of those in the crowded hell-war-
rens of our un-privileged areas." A 1965 study by the Welfare Plan-
ning Council of Dade County revealed strong correlations between
overcrowded rental housing in Miami and such social problems as
crime, juvenile delinquency, premature school termination, wel-
fare dependency, and an array of health-related adversities.[39]

Health levels in Miami's slum districts fell far below those in
white communities. As the Dade County Department of Public
Health reported in 1966, non-white Dade Countians suffered from
higher incidence of disease than local whites, while black infant
mortality and neonatal death rates were double the norm. Poor
sanitation pervaded the city's teeming ghetto precincts. Sanitary
conditions in one black housing project had degenerated in 1968
so that the county's urban planning office initiated a "rats and
roaches" program to combat rampant pest infestation. One Liberty
City rioter was led to complain to a local newsman that "we're livin'
in rat holes." In view of the squalid, crowded, and debilitating con-
ditions of black housing in Miami, it is not surprising that one U.S.
riot commission identified "grievances related to housing" as a
prime source of African American discontent.[40]

The employment prospects for Miami blacks were just as bleak.
As documented by the Greater Miami Urban League in 1962,
color-based job discrimination and insufficient education rele-
gated most black Miamians to the lowest-skilled and lowest-paying
occupations. A separate 1962 study by the Florida Council on Hu-
man Relations corroborated this analysis. According to this report,
three out of four Miami blacks worked in unskilled capacities, serv-
ing mainly as "garbage collectors, cooks, kitchen helpers, porters,
maids, bellboys, elevator operators, household domestics, dry
cleaning pressers, and helpers in the construction trades." A 1966
federal survey found that only 2.2 percent of the work force in Mi-
ami's top 15 industries represented African Americans in manage-

39. Burton T. Wilson to William Baggs, January 22, 1961, Virrick Papers, Box 2,;
    Stern, *Social Problem Levels*, 57-61.
40. Dade County Department of Public Health, *Annual Health Report for the Calendar
    Year 1966* (Miami, n.d.), 41, 49; Dade County Housing and Urban Development
    Advisory Board, minutes, September 12, 1968, Virrick Papers, Box 3; *Miami Her-
    ald*, August 9, 1968; Kerner Report, 472-473.

rial or white-collar positions. Black craftsmen accounted for only an additional 4.7 percent.[41]

Lack of job skills among Miami blacks contributed immensely to this skewed employment structure, but so did overt discrimination. In 1963, for instance, the Florida Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights documented myriad examples of race-biased hiring and advancement practices in Miami's public- and private-sector firms. As late as 1969, some companies still refused to hire or promote African Americans when job descriptions required employees to meet the public.[42]

Miami's black working class found little solace in organized labor. Pursuant to Florida's open-shop rule, trade unions were not obliged to admit all applicants. Consequently, most Dade County locals barred blacks from membership, or maintained segregated "colored" auxiliaries. Members of these Jim Crow locals seldom enjoyed regular union benefits, and they had little access to apprenticeship programs that prepared white tradesmen for career advancement. In 1962 and 1963, none of the 1,500 people engaged in apprenticeship training in Dade County was black, and by 1968 the number of black apprentices was only four.[43] Further, white union bosses enforced "gentlemen's agreements" restricting black union members to job sites in black areas. Union officials also often "furloughed" black artisans, allowing whites to work in black districts whenever business in white areas tapered off. Under this arrangement, noted a local NAACP official in 1955, skilled black mechanics actually "work[ed] as day laborers."[44]

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41. Morrison, The Negro in Greater Miami, 15-22; Florida Council on Human Relations, "Negro Employment in Miami," New South 17 (May 1962), 6, 10; Meyer, Miami Negroes, 50.

42. Florida Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Report on Florida (Washington, DC, 1963), 26, 34-35, 39-40; Dale B. Truett, "Negro Employment in Dade County" Business & Economic Dimensions 5 (December 1969), 9.

43. Florida Council on Human Relations, "Negro Employment in Miami," 6-8; Florida Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Report on Florida, 23-26; Meyer, Miami Negroes, 50; Howard W. Dixon to Herbert Hill, April 19, 1954, NAACP Papers, microfilm edition, Part 13, Series A, reel 3; Hill to Dixon, May 28, 1954, NAACP Papers, Part 13, Series A, reel 3.

44. Dixon to Hill, May 25, 1954, April 22, May 2, 1955, NAACP Papers, Part 13, Series A, reel 3; Hill to Boris Shishkin, June 7, 1954, NAACP Papers, Part 13, Series A, reel 11; Hill to Henry Lee Moon, May 12, 1954, memorandum, NAACP Papers, Part 13, Series A, reel 20; Florida Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Report on Florida, 23-26, 40; Florida Council on Human Relations, "Negro Employment in Miami," 8.

As in other central-city communities, chronic unemployment plagued Miami's underprivileged black sections. According to one study of the city's urban afflictions, 37 percent of ghetto-area heads of households were jobless as of 1967. And African American unemployment rates consistently eclipsed white unemployment figures throughout the decade. At the time of the 1968 riot, a local poverty relief agency placed the level of unemployment in Liberty City-Brownsville at 8.0 percent—more than double the county average of 3.2 percent. Local NAACP director Donald Wheeler Jones spoke to the human dimension of these statistics when he attested: "The only way a lot of Negroes are keeping a roof over their heads now is catching breaks—waiting on street corners for somebody to give them a day's work."[45]

Pervasive unemployment reinforced the sense of economic impotence that pervaded Miami's poverty-stricken black communities. As of 1970, for example, 34 percent of all Overtown families and 30 percent of all Liberty City-Brownsville families lived below poverty level, while another 28 percent of black Miamians hovered just above the poverty line. In the face of such privation, black employment difficulties bred considerable disquietude. In fact, both the *Miami Times* and the Miami Study Team of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence cited as a primary cause of the Liberty City riot the failure of the local business community during the summers of 1967 and 1968 to provide a sufficient number of jobs for black youths, despite widely-publicized promises to do so.[46]

Of course, with respect to poor housing and economic hardship, black Miami differed little from other inner-city boroughs throughout the nation. But blacks in Miami encountered additional ethnic problems. Following Fidel Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959, tens of thousands of refugees immigrated to the Miami area. By 1970, about 300,000 Cubans had settled in metropolitan Dade County. This alien ingress had grave implications for Miami's

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45. "Florida's New Cities: What Kind of Urban Planning Are We Getting?" *Florida Trend* 10 (November 1967), 25; Truett, "Negro Employment in Dade County," 3; Maxwell, "New Influx of Cubans," *Wall Street Journal,* October 12, 1965.
46. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Confronting Racial Isolation in Miami* (Washington, DC, 1982), 21; Meyer, *Miami Negroes,* 6-7, 23; *Miami Times,* August 16, 1968; *Miami Report,* viii, 3.

African American community, as hordes of Latin newcomers began competing for jobs, housing, and municipal services. As many blacks feared, Cuban immigrants quickly began infiltrating the area's low-wage, service economy, displacing large numbers of black workers in Miami's restaurant, hotel, and building industries. By the mid-1960s, the labor force in these and other menial fields—such as local fish canneries, garment trades, and laundry and dry cleaning companies—had all experienced an impressive black-to-Cuban turnover.[47]

As economic competition between blacks and Hispanics grew, so too did African American hostility toward the "Cuban invasion" of South Florida. As early as 1961, the Greater Miami Urban League complained that blacks were "systematically being pushed out of [jobs] to make room for Cubans." Two years later, *Ebony* magazine enumerated an array of problems that the Hispanic immigrants brought to black Miami "in the wake of their invasion." In 1965, Miami's NAACP branch expressed "great concern" to Governor Haydon Burns about the burdens ensuing from Cuban-engendered "economic oppression." In their study of the Liberty City riot federal investigators identified economic competition between blacks and Cubans as a primary cause of the disturbance.[48]

Governmental favoritism toward Cuba's anticommunist exiles also strained racial tensions in Miami. The federal Cuban Refugee Program (CRP), for example, provided the expatriates with food and clothing, housing assistance, medical care, educational programs, and employment services. Local blacks, meantime, had little access to any of these benefits.[49] Unemployed Cubans also

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47. Cal Brumley, "Cuban Exodus," *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 1960; Neil Maxwell, "Unwelcome Guests," *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 1963; Maxwell, "New Influx of Cubans," *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1965; *New York Times*, August 10, October 21, 1961; Allan Morrison, "Miami's Cuban Refugee Crisis," *Ebony* 18 (July 1963), 96-100; T.A.P. Staff to Haydon Burns, "Problems Relative to Cuban Refugees in Dade County," October 29, 1965, memorandum, Haydon Burns Papers, Record Group 102, Series 131, Box 23, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee (hereinafter Burns Papers). See also Raymond A. Mohl, "On the Edge: Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan Miami since 1959," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 69 (July 1990), 37-56.
48. H. Daniel Lang, "Testimony for the Senate Sub-Committee on Cuban Refugees," December 1, 1961, National Urban League Papers, Part 2, Series 2, Box 15, Library of Congress; Morrison, "Miami's Cuban Refugee Crisis," 96-100; Donald Wheeler Jones to Haydon Burns, October 13, 1965, Burns Papers, Box 23; *Miami Report*, viii, 3.
49. Mohl, "On the Edge," 45-50.

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qualified for CRP relief payments that exceeded the maximum county welfare aid for which native Miamians were eligible.[50] With assistance from the Small Business Administration (SBA), many Cubans established their own businesses, helping to make the Cuban community a self-sustaining and prosperous emigré enclave. The black community, by contrast, received almost no SBA funds. In 1968, the SBA loaned only about $80,000 to blacks in Dade County, while awarding almost $1 million more in loans to Hispanics.[51] Such seemingly preferential treatment of Miami's Cuban refugees contributed to the rage and resentment of local blacks.[52]

The many grievances and frustrations of Miami's black community notwithstanding, the riot in Liberty City still might not have occurred had police-community relations not been so poor. "Almost invariably," wrote the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1968, "the incident that incites disorder arises from police action."[53] Such was the case in Miami; violence ensued when police overreacted to the August 7 Vote Power rally. The city's first racial disorder thus resulted from the policies and practices of the Miami Police Department.

An event during the summer of 1967 epitomized the negative tenor of police-community relations in 1960s' Miami. As rumors of impending civil strife abounded in July of that year, several local attorneys offered to aid police in processing the inordinate number of prisoners that a major disorder would likely produce. To their surprise, the assistant police chief told them that riot participants possessed no rights, that most rioters would be dead or hospitalized anyway, and that, therefore, the lawyers' services were not needed. Upon reporting the chief's remarks to the city attorney's office, the counselors were simply told, "let the chips fall where they may." Not surprisingly, the attorneys "left the office with the

50. *New York Times*, October 21, 1961; Morrison, "Miami's Cuban Refugee Crisis," 100; Maxwell, "New Influx of Cubans," *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1965; T.A.P. Staff to Burns, "Problems Relative to Cuban Refugees," Burns Papers, Box 23.
51. Marvin Dunn and Alex Stepick III, "Blacks in Miami," in Guillermo J. Grenier and Alex Stepick III, eds., *Miami Now: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change* (Gainesville, 1992), 52; Mohl, "On the Edge," 45-50.
52. Meyer, *Miami Negroes*, 18; T.A.P. Staff to Burns, "Problems Relative to Cuban Refugees," Burns Papers, Box 23; Jones to Burns, October 13, 1965, Burns Papers, Box 23.
53. Kerner Report, 206.

impression that if a riot were to begin, the police might very well be the initiating factor."[54]

The lack of police regard for community relations issues stemmed largely from the rigid law-and-order beliefs of Chief Walter Headley. Miami's police commandant since the 1940s, Headley saw no linkage between law enforcement and community relations. Moreover, the veteran chief espoused the type of minority relations policies common in Deep South cities at that time and he made little attempt to establish a friendly dialogue with Miami's African American community. On the contrary, he aggravated racial tensions when, in December 1967, he "declared war" on lawbreakers in Miami's negro districts. "Community relations and all that sort of thing has failed," blustered the chief. He vowed to "use shotguns and dogs" to cut crime in the city's slums. As to the prevention of civil uprisings, Headley offered a simple formula: "when the looting starts, the shooting starts."[55]

Chief Headley did not deny the racial overtones of his policy. He admitted that the primary target of his campaign was Negro males, "young hoodlums," between the ages of 15 and 20. To keep this group orderly, Headley charged his officers to enforce the city's "stop and frisk" ordinance, which empowered police officers to invoke search and seizure authority at will.[56]

Generally, Miami's black citizenry interpreted Headley's show-of-force policy as a racist declaration of an "open season" on ghetto residents. As the Dade County Community Relations Board noted, many citizens feared Headley's statements meant "a war on people rather than a war on crime." And, police actions often confirmed these fears. There were almost daily confrontations between blacks and police as officers broke up curbside gatherings, frisking and questioning neighborhood youths, whom they commonly addressed as "boy" or "nigger." Shotgun-and-dog patrols routinely entered black places of recreation, demanding identification and searching patrons for weapons without cause. Occasionally, Mi-

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54. Bruce Rogow and Joseph Segor to Robert King High, July 28, 1967, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3; Rogow to Howard W. Dixon and others, July 31, 1967, memorandum, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3.
55. *Miami Report*, 2; George Lardner, Jr., "Miami Declares War: Epidemic of 'Law and Order,'" *The Nation* 206 (February 19, 1968), 231-232; *Miami Herald*, December 27, 1967; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 28.
56. *Miami Herald*, December 27, 1967, August 9, 1968; Lardner, "Epidemic of 'Law and Order,'" 232; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 33-34.

ami's "finest" crossed the bounds of excessive force, as when two lawmen stripped a black teenager to his underwear and dangled him by his ankles from a highway overpass. Such things seemed not to bother Chief Headley. "We don't mind being accused of police brutality," he told the news media, "my police officers . . . are used to it."[57]

Police-community relations deteriorated steadily during Headley's get-tough administration. In the months prior to the Liberty City affair, citizen complaints about police harassment, civil rights violations, and verbal abuse became commonplace. And these same complaints found ample restatement among participants in the 1968 uprising. "You don't see no white man getting stopped and frisked," shouted one ghetto resident. Dozens of other blacks, meantime, sounded off about "Police stoppin' you [on] every corner," about "them crackers searching you," and about "terribly cruel" police behavior.[58]

As the Miami Study Team of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence noted, Chief Headley's attempt at "keeping an underprivileged and restless minority cowed and orderly by a constant visual display of force" backfired. The chief's hard-line program ultimately helped breed the very unrest it was supposed to deter. Through his discriminatory application of the law, Headley only added to the alienation and embitterment of Miami's African American community. Blacks felt powerless and trapped, "boxed in" by "the Man." As a result, many blacks saw nothing to lose by striking out. One youth spoke to the desperation of thousands when he declared, "they got guns, the police, but tell 'em we been dead a long time."[59]

Apart from such testimonials, there is additional evidence that Chief Headley's inattention to community relations contributed to the onset violence in Liberty City. Though most of the district lay within the City of Miami, parts of Liberty City extended into unin-

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57. Dade County Community Relations Board, minutes, January 4, 1968, Virrick Papers, Box 2; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 33; Lardner, "Epidemic of 'Law and Order,'" 232-233; *Miami Report*, 3, 26; *Miami Herald*, December 29, 1967, January 16, 29, May 2, 1968. For evidence of police brutality during the 1968 riot, see *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968; WCKT News Department, "Live News," December 3, 1968, transcript, Miami Riot Files, Graham Papers, Box 3.
58. Meyer, *Miami Negroes*, 19-20, 39-41; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 33-34; *Miami Herald*, December 27, 1967, January 29, August 9, 1968.
59. *Miami Report*, 26-27; Boone and Farmar, "Violence in Miami," 33-34; *Miami Herald*, August 9, 1968; *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968.

corporated Dade County. These wards fell within the purview of
the Dade County Department of Public Safety, headed by Sheriff E.
Wilson Purdy. Unlike Headley's department, Purdy's office did im-
plement a community relations program, the results of which
showed the chief to have been wrong in positing the failure of com-
munity relations efforts.

Upon taking office in 1967, Sheriff Purdy worked to establish a
rapport between his department and the black community within
his jurisdiction. To this end, his office created a Community Ser-
vice Section composed of 11 full-time human relations officers.
These men met regularly with community spokesmen, visited
neighborhood bars and poolrooms, and generally helped people
cope with everyday problems.[60]

The benefits of this community relations program were many.
For one thing, it allowed the Dade County Sheriff's Office to open
effective channels of communication with the African American
community—something the City of Miami Police never achieved.
Consequently, Purdy's department earned some degree of trust in
black areas. As the *Miami Times* wrote in August 1968, "our hats are
off to 'top cop' Purdy and his staff of trained personnel." Purdy's
community concern helped reduce criminal activity. While the
crime rate in Dade County rose by 20 percent in 1967, equaling the
national average, the increase was a mere 4.1 percent in the Liberty
City-Brownsville area patrolled by the Sheriff's Office.[61]

Another indicator of the success of Purdy's policy was the geo-
graphic delimitation of the 1968 riot itself. During the two days of
violence, the disturbance remained confined to the City of Miami,
while the county segment of Liberty City remained peaceful. This is
not to say that black residents in Purdy's precincts were content
with their quality of life. But these spatial characteristics do lend
credence to the *Miami Times*'s assertion that "last week's riot vividly
pointed out the community relations policy of Chief Walter Head-
ley has failed miserably."[62]

Given the long-standing injustices endured by Miami's African
American community, as well as the volatile climate of black urban

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60. Salter and Mings, "Geographic Aspect of the 1968 Miami Racial Disturbance,"
    84; *Miami Herald*, May 1, 1968.
61. *Miami Times*, August 9, 1968; *Miami Herald*, May 1, 1968.
62. Salter and Mings, "Geographic Aspect of the 1968 Miami Racial Disturbance,"
    85; *Miami Report* Report, 1; *Miami Times*, August 16, 1968.

America, the 1968 riot in Liberty City should have surprised few; it was a long time in coming. But, most white Miamians had ignored the problems afflicting the city's black communities and had overlooked all signs of trouble. As a result, many of them simply attributed the chaos to the work of outside provocateurs. Despite such rationalizations, the Liberty City riot was home grown. The seeds of discontent had been planted much earlier than most white Dade Countians wished to admit.

Like people in general, Miami's black citizens sought to conduct their lives with dignity and self-respect. As one revolter put it, "the Negro wants to be treated like a human being."[63] Few black Miamians in the 1960s felt they were so treated. Race-biased practices in the job market excluded most blacks from decent occupational opportunities. Poverty and housing discrimination compelled blacks to crowd into blight- and disease-racked slums, where families splintered and crime rates soared. City policemen offered little service or protection in these felon-ridden neighborhoods. Justice seemed anything but colorblind. Such circumstances made Miami's African American community ripe for rebellion by 1968.

The Liberty City riot was a proactive protest measure. It represented an African American attempt to improve the quality of life in black Miami by forcing a seemingly indifferent white society to recognize black demands for community control and empowerment. It is tragic that such efforts were largely unsuccessful. Repeated rioting in Liberty City and Overtown during the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated the lack of improved life chances for most black Miamians.[64] As late as 1982, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights could still report that, despite the gains of the civil rights era, "blacks have been excluded from the economic mainstream in Miami." The black community still seems lodged at the bottom of the metropolitan economy, racked by poverty, high unemployment, segregated housing and poor schooling.[65] Many of the human relations problems that spawned revolt in 1968 still pervade the African American community.

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63. *Miami Herald,* August 9, 1968.
64. See Porter and Dunn, *The Miami Riot of 1980;* Al Featherstone, testimony re "Miami Crisis," FCHR Files, Box 3; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Confronting Racial Isolation in Miami; Miami Herald,* January 17-19, 22, 1989; *Miami Times,* January 19, 26, 1989; *New York Times,* January 18, 22, 1989.
65. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Confronting Racial Isolation in Miami,* 18; Mohl, "Pattern of Race Relations in Miami since the 1920s," 354-356.