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THE POLICE INTERPRETATION OF THE DETROIT RIOT OF 1967:

An Examination of the Dimensions and Determinants of
the Interpretation

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Christmas although a few interviews were completed after the new year. Interviewing of inspectors began in early February and, with a few exceptions, was completed at the end of that month.

The response of the police officers was, overall, quite good. It is clear that the questionnaire was meaningful, gave officers a chance to state their feelings about numerous aspects of police work and the events of July. Interviews of 5 or more hours in length were not unusual and the modal interview length was about three hours.

Now for the results. There are four basic findings.

First, for most officers in the lower echelons, riot interpretation and the view of the black community depend largely on the officers' race. White officers generally agree with the white community and black officers agree with the black community. Blacks and whites, whether officers or civilians, are in substantial disagreement. For example, 20 percent of lower echelon white officers interpreted the riot as protest while 28 to 36 percent in the white community so interpreted it; 55 percent of black officers interpreted the riot as protest while 62 to 64 percent of black citizens so interpreted it. Even where a reason was more emphasized by either police or community, the racial difference holds. For example, many white officers blame the riot on lack of respect for authority. This reason is much less often given by white citizens, but it is absent entirely in the black community and among black officers. Interestingly, hardly anyone, police officer or citizen, white or black, blamed hoodlums or "riff-raff".

In actuality, lower echelon white officers' interpretations of the riot are closer still to those of the working class white community. This is not surprising because most white officers came from working class backgrounds. For example 20 percent of lower echelon officers interpreted the riot as protest

while 25 percent of working class whites so interpreted it. In contrast, 44 percent of middle-class whites interpreted the riot as protest.

These data strongly suggests that police officers' attitudes are formed well before they become officers and that the attitudes of the racial community in which they live remain of considerable influence.

The only issue on which there was substantial disagreement between the lower echelon officer and the racial community to which he belongs was the white view of whether the riot was planned in advance. The majority of white lieutenants, sergeants and detectives did not believe the riot was planned while white patrolmen by a three to one margin believed it was. The white community by a three to one margin believed it was planned. Only 22 percent of black officers and 33 percent of the black community saw the riot as planned in advance. Though later I will discuss the views of the inspectors in more detail, just let me note here that only 34 percent of the inspectors saw the riot as planned.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the plan, as perceived by those white officers who perceive one, is exactly the kind and planned by exactly those that, if true, would most disturb police officers and constitute the most direct challenge to police authority.¹ More than 30 percent of all white officers perceived the plan as testing for weakness, to divide the country, to create trouble or disturbance, to add to the strength of militant groups or to discredit the police. In contrast only 4 percent of white officers saw the plan as an attempt to bring attention to black problems. In contrast, only 6 percent of black officers interpreted the plan as an attack on the country and police.

The same racial difference obtains when persons in the community and on the force are asked about riot outcome. The majority of whites of all ranks believe the riot has had bad effects on race relations. In this they are similar

¹See Skolnick (1966 p.90) for an insightful discussion of the potential for police counter-violence when officers feel that their ability to compel obedience to authority is threatened.

to the white community though slightly more pessimistic. Black officers and the black community are almost equally split into those who are optimistic, those who are pessimistic and those who see no change. On the whole, however, there is a slight predominance of positive expectations among black officers.

The disagreement in interpretation between white officers and the black community and the form it takes are ominous findings. Because the Detroit Police Department is eight percent black and the city approximately 40 percent black, it is obvious that the ghetto must be policed by a police force that is in substantial disagreement about a critical social event (and indeed, as will be shown later, about the entire spectrum of race relations). Further many white officers perceive the riot as planned and as threats to police authority, an authority central to his role. The potential for conflict that resides in these differences of opinion can hardly be underestimated.

A second ominous finding is that the optimism of the black officers (and the black community), is based on the hope that gain will arise from an increase in white awareness and willingness to help. Evidence from the white community, however, shows little willingness among most whites to help in ways that would be significant.

It is quite important to note that black and white officers are not really as divergent in view as may appear from answers to questions dealing with race. On those issues there is an understandable difference in opinion. On many fundamental issues, however, a police officer is a police officer regardless of race. Officers of both races are equally quick to defend the profession when it is criticized. For example, roughly 90 percent of officers of both races agreed it was frustrating to stand by and watch looting without being able to do much to stop it and that looters, not innocent bystanders, were arrested by police officers.

The second major finding is that the officers' view of the black community is closely related to how he interprets the riot. If he feels the community is the victim of discrimination, he is more likely to interpret the riot as protest and see it as unplanned. If he feels the black community is not the victim of discrimination, he is more likely to see the riot as due to the work of agitators, lack of respect for law and order or getting something for nothing. He is also likely to see it as planned. Since the overwhelmingly majority of white officers believe that societal arrangements are the same for blacks and whites or actually favor blacks, most do not see the riot as protest. For example, a majority of white officers believe that blacks are favored over whites in the school system. Black officers overwhelmingly see the black community as the victims of discrimination in every area but one and a majority see the riot as protest.

The third major conclusion is that most lower echelon white officers' view of the black community is one of distrust and some fear. Most are at best unsympathetic and at worst hostile. When one considers the fact that most white officers feel that in housing, schools, jobs and law enforcement agencies, blacks are treated equally or better than whites; that blacks would resort to force to get more; and that a near majority believe that black dislike of the police is because of the anti-social nature of the black community; and that there was a riot, one conclusion boldly stands out. The majority view among lower echelon white officers of the black community is that it is a privileged minority, susceptible to the influence of agitators capable of galvanizing into action a people without real grievances, deficient in respect for law and order and ready to use violence to attain a still greater advantage over the white community. Implicit in this view is a perception of the black community as primitive, emotional and easily aroused to anti-social action.

Once again, this interpretation, so inconsistent with reality, is in line with many segments of the white community's views. They are not distinctive police views. The problem is broader than the police though the sensitive position the police occupy make concern with their views justified.

Despite these rather unfavorable views which lower echelon police hold toward the black population, it is important to recognize that police are not hostile or unsympathetic toward all blacks. One of the questions asked officers to indicate the amount of respect for law and order that exists in the middle and lower class black and white communities. It was found that the class of the citizen is more important than his race in the resulting estimates. This was true for officers of all ranks and of both races.

The problem, however, is that while white officers do perceive middle class and lower class blacks as they say they do, most blacks are perceived as lower class. Thus, when the black American and his community as a whole is being judged, the lower class view is the predominant one. Another way of putting this is that there is a general lower class attribution to the black community. If a black citizen can demonstrate middle class membership, the characteristics of the attribution shift; but until he does, he is perceived and treated as a member of the lower class. Thus the potential beneficial effects of differentiating between black citizens tends to be washed out by a general stereotyped set toward the black community.

The fourth major finding is that there is a major difference in interpretation of the riot and view of the black community between the lower echelon white officers and the inspectors and higher ranks. Where lower echelon officers saw the riot as caused by agitators, lack of respect for law and order or getting something for nothing, a near majority of higher echelon officers interpreted the riot as protest. No other reason was as important

for these higher echelon officers. Thus black officers and white inspectors are in closer agreement than are inspectors and lower echelon white officers. This does not mean, however, that inspectors and black officers are in full agreement. Inspectors, for example, are more likely than black officers to believe that a role was played by agitators or a lack of respect for authority.

Inspectors are also different in how they view the black community. They view the black community as not too dissimilar from the white community. They also believe that the black community feels discriminated against even though they do not agree that this is the true state of affairs. This means that even though the inspectors disagree with the black community's judgment, they can at least understand why protest, violent or otherwise, is possible, though obviously they would hardly approve of it. Further, most inspectors, unlike lower echelon white officers but like black officers, perceive that there is a genuine problem in police-black community relations. They tend, however, to see the problem as arising from the structural role of the Department in the larger society or in black perceptions rather than in police behavior. Black officers reverse the order. They see police behavior as more important than black perceptions. To the inspectors, the problem presumably becomes one of communication.

The different views of the inspectors probably arise from experience quite different in nature from that of the lower echelon officers. They come into substantial contact with all elements of the black community not just persons involved with possible criminal offenses or the emotionally crippled who may appear to some as disreputable or immoral. They meet with leaders, ordinary citizens and concerned groups. Further, their general scope is necessarily broadened. They have access to community planners, social scientists, and government officials to name but a few, all of whom provide at