Joyce A. Baugh
The Detroit School Busing Case:
Milliken v. Bradley and the Controversy Over Desegregation
Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011.

CHAPTER 2

Metropolitan Detroit

From Boomtown to Ticking Time Bomb

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal." This provocative conclusion from the February 1968 report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders – also referred to as the Kerner Commission, after its chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner – poignantly described conditions in urban America in the mid-to-late 1960s. President Johnson had created this commission to investigate the causes of the civil disorders that rocked nearly 150 cities in 1967, including Detroit. Many occurred in urban communities in the North, Midwest, and West – areas that had not been targeted by the traditional southern Civil Rights Movement. Although numerous civil rights activities had occurred in communities outside of the South from the 1940s through the 1960s, the most publicized efforts were those directed at eradicating Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement in the South. The system of Jim Crow reflected racial separation required by law, known as "de jure" segregation. After passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, leaders from the southern movement joined forces with their counterparts in the North to address racial discrimination and inequality there. While there previously had been segregation laws in many northern states, by the mid-1960s, most of the North was characterized by what was termed "de facto" segregation. This refers to racial separation that exists in fact but is not created by specific statutes nor enforced by statutes or judicial decisions.

Alan Anderson and George Pickering detail the efforts of the Chicago Movement to address de facto segregation in the city, which they later refer to as the "metropolitan color line." "In the North . . . the issues were different. Legally mandated segregation and discrimination had been mostly eliminated by midcentury, but the color line continued in the form of segregated and inferior schools and housing

for blacks and in black poverty and unemployment. This *de facto* segregation was not legally mandated, but many of its major causes were legally sanctioned." Anderson later contends that the distinction between de facto and de jure segregation was largely unhelpful, given the role of public officials in creating and preserving both housing and school segregation in northern communities. Specific examples of this will be discussed later in this chapter and in those that follow.

At the time of *Milliken*, and indeed for many years previously, Detroit, like Chicago, reflected the metropolitan color line. Historian and Detroit native Thomas Sugrue carefully documents thedevelopment and perpetuation of this color line. Sugrue argues that the urban crisis in Detroit was not the result of the 1967 rebellions, asconventional wisdom has suggested, but rather stems from events of the 1940s through early 1960s. He notes that white flight from Detroit to the suburbs began during the post–World War II period, long before *Milliken* was decided. Sugrue discusses the interrelationship of three simultaneous forces as the primary explanation for the economic, social, and racial crises that have afflicted Detroit (and many other major cities): (1) the loss of thousands of good-paying, secure industrial jobs, (2) the persistence of employment discrimination and (3) intractable racial segregation in housing. Understanding the interplay among these three factors provides insight into the social, economic, and political climate in the Detroit metropolitan area in the years leading up to *Milliken*.

Detroit, like other northern cities, had attracted thousands of southern African Americans seeking to escape their status as second-class citizens under Jim Crow segregation and disenfranchisement. During World War I and the first "Great Migration," hundreds of thousands of black Americans left the farms of the South to find better opportunities in northern cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit. As Table 2.1 indicates, from 1910 to 1920, 525,000 southern blacks migrated to northern cities, followed by another 877,000 in the following decade. While the numbers declined during the Great Depression, they rose again even more dramatically during the period between 1940 and 1960, with nearly 1.5 million black migrants arriving each decade. Not surprisingly, the black population in northern cities increased significantly between 1950 and 1970. In Detroit it increased from 16 percent to 44 percent in that period.

Table 2.1. Migration of Southern Blacks to Northern Cities, 1870–1970

1870–1880	71,000
1880–1890	80,000
1890–1900	174,000
1900–1910	197,000
1910–1920	525,000
1920–1930	877,000
1930–1940	398,000
1940–1950	1,468,000
1950–1960	1,473,000
1960–1970	1,380,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Here is what census data show about the black population percentage of several northern cities during this period:

	1950	1970
Chicago	14	33
Cleveland	16	38
Detroit	16	44
Philadelphia	18	34

These increases were the result of black migration into the cities, combined with white flight to the suburbs. Although many black migrants to these cities did find new economic opportunities unavailable to them in the South, they also faced discrimination in employment and housing. In addition, changes in the economy in industrial states and cities made it difficult for many to gain a foothold in their new communities.

Employment Discrimination and Economic Decline

In the 1940s, African Americans in Detroit gained access to industrial jobs, mostly in semiskilled and unskilled positions. These employment

gains resulted not only from wartime production demands, but also from the postwar economic boom, efforts by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) to promote equality in the workplace, and President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 mandating nondiscrimination in war industries. Although blacks gained access to some jobs, they did not experience equality in their employment. Job discrimination was "widespread but not universal," with large variations from workplace to workplace. According to Sugrue, due to practices across various industries – automobile manufacturing, steel making, machine tool production, retail work, employment by the city government, and construction labor – a "dense and tangled web of forces . . . kept blacks, in the aggregate, entrapped in Detroit's worst, most insecure jobs." Black workers also were subjected to ugly acts of racial harassment and degradation. One involved the Ex-Cell-O Company, a major machinery manufacturer. In 1951, nearly all of its white employees walked off the job to protest the fact that one skilled black worker had been offered a position in an all-white department.

Racial discrimination in employment advertising and by employment agencies also had an impact. Prior to passage of the state's Fair Employment Practices Law (FEP) in 1955, race-specific job listings were commonplace, including those placed with state agencies. Detroit's black workers fared little better with private agencies, many of whom listed jobs in the yellow pages as "Colored" and "White." Similar labels appeared in newspaper ads, particularly those for small employers.

As the economic crisis in 2008–2009 demonstrated, the importance of the automobile industry to Detroit cannot be overstated. In the decades before *Milliken*, not only was it the largest employer in the city, but it also was the largest employer of blacks. The black percentage of auto workers increased from a mere 4 percent at the start of World War II to 15 and 16 percent in 1945 and 1960, respectively. In the automobile industry, racial discrimination was most prevalent in the skilled trades area, where apprenticeship programs often excluded blacks and seniority rules worked against them.

The steel industry and city employment were the other best employment arenas for blacks, but, again, job segregation was the norm. In the steel industry, blacks were concentrated in unskilled and

unskilled jobs, while black city employees were confined to unskilled work, transportation jobs, low-level clerical work, and primary education. Blacks found the fewest opportunities in the chemical industry, small automotive plants, machine and tool companies, breweries, retail sales, and the building trades/construction industry.

The exclusion of fully qualified black electricians, carpenters, and masons from unionized construction jobs was particularly significant. Their only alternative was to be hired as day laborers for a fraction of the wages paid to their union counterparts. This "casual labor" market (referred to locally as the "slave market") required them to gather at major intersections in certain neighborhoods to wait for work. The work was unpredictable, short-term, and strenuous, and there always were more potential workers available than jobs. Consequently, there often were large numbers of black men on the streets during the day, many of whom drank alcoholic beverages as they waited for work. One consequence of these images of unemployed or underemployed black men drinking and hanging out on street corners was the reinforcement of negative racial stereotypes. This undoubtedly helped spur the resistance of some whites to school desegregation, especially suburban residents whose only visual references to black people were these stereotypical images.

Detroit may have been a boomtown in the 1940s, but by the end of the decade, a long period of economic decline had begun, with the city hemorrhaging thousands and thousands of good-paying as well as entry-level manufacturing jobs, which previously allowed thousands of working-class Detroit residents to enjoy a decent standard of living. Census figures show that the number of manufacturing jobs declined from 338,400 in 1947 to just 204,400 in 1958 – a drop of nearly 40 percent. As workers were laid off, relocated, or dismissed, the ripple effect on the local economy was tremendous. Local businesses closed as their customers no longer had adequate incomes to purchase the goods and services they offered. Vacant homes, shuttered factories, and abandoned storefronts and restaurants marked the city's steady decline.

Sugrue cites automation as the "most important force that restructured Detroit's economy after World War II." As automated assembly lines were instituted in manufacturing plants, manufacturers were able to increase worker output and reduce their labor costs. Although

automation was a nationwide phenomenon, Detroit-area workers were particularly hard hit because many of the very labor-intensive engine production jobs were located in Detroit area plants. In addition, heavy automation by General Motors and Ford helped to drive independent automobile manufacturers as well as parts suppliers out of business.

Next to automation, plant location decisions by the "Big Three" automobile manufacturers contributed to Detroit's economic decline. During the 1940s and 1950s, Ford, GM, and Chrysler closed, downsized, and relocated numerous plants. New facilities were built not only in small- and medium-sized cities in other states, but over twenty new plants were built in the Detroit suburbs.

Once the Big Three shifted their production facilities out of the city, other auto-related companies also left—machine tool companies, metalworking companies, and parts manufacturers. Also contributing to the economic difficulties were complaints by business owners about taxes and strong unions and a shift in the 1950s of federal military spending away from states in the Midwest and Northeast to the Sunbelt states.

The effects of the economic downturn were dramatic and far-reaching. Older workers were hit extremely hard, particularly those whose plants were closed or who did not have sufficient seniority to transfer to plants in other areas. Their work experience in heavy industry did not provide them with the necessary skills for newer jobs. Many workers, black and white, with little education and few skills could no longer look to the entry-level manufacturing jobs that had provided a means to move up the economic ladder. The elimination of these types of jobs, in conjunction with racial discrimination, was especially devastating to Detroit's black residents. As a result, countless numbers of them became part of the "long-term unemployed." Summing up the devastation created by the economic deterioration, Sugrue pointed to the closed and abandoned factory buildings, blocks of boarded-up stores and restaurants, burned-out and empty homes in formerly middle-class and working-class neighborhoods, and trash-filled vacant lots.

Working-class and middle-class whites who had adequate resources and skills moved to the suburbs. As the census data show in Table 2.2, the white population in suburban Detroit grew from 732,000 in 1940

Table 2.2. Detroit Suburban Population, 1900–1970

	Total	White	Black
1900	145,000	144,000	1,000
1910	148,000	147,000	1,000
1920	312,000	308,000	4,000
1930	609,000	592,000	17,000
1940	754,000	732,000	22,000
1950	1,167,000	1,106,000	61,000
1960	2,092,000	2,015,000	77,000
1970	2,668,000	2,591,000	97,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

to 1,106,000 in 1950 and to 2,015,000 in 1960. The number of black residents living in the suburbs throughout this same period was very small—22,000 in 1940, 61,000 in 1950, and 77,000 in 1960. Those whites who remained in the city grew angrier and more frustrated. White flight in the 1950s led to a city that became "poorer and blacker," characterized by fiscal distress due to disinvestment and the departure of much of its tax base. In this environment, concerns about housing and neighborhood boundaries took on added proportions.

Racially Segregated Housing

Racial conflicts over neighborhoods and housing did not begin with economic decline in the late 1940s, however. From the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, Detroit's black residents generally were not tightly concentrated in all-black neighborhoods. They often lived in the same neighborhoods as recent white immigrants, although perhaps on different streets. The turning point was the first Great Migration, from about 1910 to 1930. The large influx of black migrants was alarming to many whites in Detroit, as it was to white residents of other northern cities. Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton note the hardening of white racial views, the increasing use of terms such as "nigger" and "darkey" in northern newspapers along with unflattering stories about black crime and vice, and an upsurge in racial violence.

Table 2.3. Population of Detroit, 1910–1970

	Total	Black	% Black	Others	% Others
1910	465,766	5,741	1.2	460,025	98.8
1920	993,675	40,838	4.1	952,837	95.9
1930	1,568,662	120,066	7.7	1,448,596	92.3
1940	1,623,452	149,119	9.2	1,474,333	90.8
1950	1,849,568	300,506	16.2	1,549,062	83.8
1960	1,670,144	482,229	28.9	1,187,915	71.1
1970	1,511,482	660,428	44.5	851,054	55.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

A second period of increased migration of southern blacks, along with white migrants, beginning in World War II, put tremendous pressure on the local housing stock. (See Tables 2.1 and 2.3.) The wartime production boom in Detroit had created unprecedented job opportunities, as the Ford Motor company and other automobile manufacturers shifted their production from cars to military hardware, airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles. Sugrue declares, "Almost overnight, Detroit had gone from one of the most depressed urban areas in the country to a boomtown, a magnet that attracted workers from all over the United States. . . . Between 1940 and 1943, the number of unemployed workers in Detroit fell from 135,000 to a mere 4,000." While the boom was good news for workers, there simply was not sufficient housing to meet the new demand. The shortage was particularly acute for black residents.

OSSIAN SWEET

One early Detroit example of racial violence in 1925 involved Ossian Sweet. Sweet, a prominent black physician, had purchased a home in an all-white neighborhood. When a mob of several hundred whites tried to force his family to move out, several shots were fired from the home occupied by Sweet and several relatives and friends; one of the mob participants was killed. Subsequently, Sweet, his wife, and nine other relatives and friends were charged with murder. The NAACP hired Clarence Darrow, the famous defense lawyer, to represent the defendants. The trial produced a hung jury, and the state subsequently decided to prosecute the defendants separately, beginning with Sweet's brother. He was acquitted by an all-white jury, and charges against the others were eventually dropped. Despite the acquittal, this incident was a clear harbinger of the widespread racial conflict and violence to come.

STEERING

Segregation and discrimination also aggravated racial tensions, producing numerous conflicts, particularly related to housing. Despite improvements over life in the Jim Crow South, most blacks in Detroit were confined to lower-paying, less secure jobs, so they lacked resources to purchase homes, and very little reasonably priced rental housing was available. But those who did have the financial means nevertheless faced other barriers in the housing market, especially the discriminatory practices of the real estate and banking industries, as well as policies of the federal and local governments. Real estate agents refused to do business with black clients, practicing a policy of "steering" blacks and whites to neighborhoods strictly defined by race, and they encouraged white homeowners to place restrictive covenants on their properties to avoid selling to blacks. The Detroit Real Estate Board adopted its national association's Code of Ethics steering policy, which commanded that real estate agents would "never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any industry whose presence will be clearly detrimental to real estate values." This policy, originally enacted in 1924, was amended in 1950 with the specific reference to race or nationality deleted, but it was clear that the meaning continued to be the same. Agents who violated racial covenants, the steering policy, and other discriminatory practices supported by their national and local boards faced the wrath of white customers and other agents.

RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS

Restrictive covenants became an important tool for ensuring residential segregation after the Supreme Court invalidated local segregation ordinances in a 1917 case, *Buchanan v. Warley*. Here the Court held that the government had violated the Fourteenth Amendment rights of property owners to dispose of their property as they saw fit.

Restrictive covenants became a means to get around the Fourteenth Amendment, as these were private contractual agreements among property owners specifying that the buyer and seller not sell or lease property to blacks, and sometimes other groups, for a designated period of time. Provisions in the covenants called for enforcement by courts if they were violated, and the agreements generally took effect after a specified percentage of property owners in the relevant community signed on. In 1926, the Supreme Court dismissed a challenge to a restrictive covenant in a Washington, D.C., case, *Corrigan v. Buckley*. Justice Sanford's opinion relied on the ruling in the *Civil Rights Cases* (1883), in which the Court held that the Fourteenth Amendment did not authorize Congress to legislate against private discrimination but was limited to discrimination involving "state action." In refusing to strike the covenant in *Corrigan*, Sanford concluded, therefore, that private individuals were not prohibited "from entering into contracts respecting the control and disposition of their own property." For the next two decades, federal courts enforced restrictive covenants in other cases from the District of Columbia, and several state appellate courts also utilized *Corrigan* to uphold restrictive covenants against challenges.

The issue of restrictive covenants went before the Supreme Court again in 1948, in *Shelley v. Kraemer* and *McGhee v. Sipes*, companion cases from St. Louis, Missouri, and Detroit, respectively. In the lead case, the Shelleys, an African American couple, purchased a home in a white neighborhood, not knowing that the home was covered by a restrictive covenant that had been operating since 1911. The covenant restricted property owners from selling to blacks or to persons of the "Mongolian race." Two months after the purchase, the Kraemers sued to prevent the Shelleys from taking possession of the home. The trial court refused to enforce the agreement because it did not have the requisite number of signatures, but the Missouri Supreme Court ordered that it be enforced. In the Detroit case, Minnie and Orsel McGhee, a middle-class black couple, bought a house in a white neighborhood in northwest Detroit. Shortly thereafter, they received a letter from their neighbor Benjamin Sipes and members of the all-white Northwest Civic Association, requesting that they "kindly vacate the property." After the McGhees refused, Sipes and the association sued to keep them out, claiming that the covenant required

that none of the homes in the neighborhood could be "sold [o]r leased to, [o]r occupied by any person other than one of the Caucasian race." Both the trial court and the Michigan Supreme Court upheld the agreement.

When the cases reached the U.S. Supreme Court, the decisions represented a substantial departure from precedent. The justices did not invalidate the covenants themselves but instead ruled that state enforcement of race-specific restrictive covenants violaed the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. Chief Justice Vinson wrote: "So long as the purposes of those agreements are effectuated by voluntary adherence to their terms, there has been noaction by the State and the provisions of the [Fourteenth] Amendment have not been violated." In these two cases, however, Vinson observed that the enforcement of the covenant by the state judiciary "denied petitioners the equal protection of the laws."

The high court's ruling, however, did not mean the end of this practice. Restrictive covenants continued to operate bothin the city of Detroit and its suburbs. In fact, the federal government which aided in the development of suburbs in the 1940s and 1950s, actually advocated that these agreements be honored in the appraisal process for suburban homes. Moreover, once the enforcement of racially based covenants was declared illegal, other types of agreements took their place. New covenants prescribed architectural standards and lot size and barred multifamily occupancy; these regulation limited the home-owning possibilities for many black families, who lacked the resources to purchase or rent an entire house. Theserestrictions became indirect methods for maintaining Detroit's racial boundaries.

HOLC RATING SYSTEM AND RESIDENTIAL SECURITY MAPS

In addition to recommending the use of restrictive covenants, the federal government instituted other policies that worked hand-in-hand with private sector practices to maintain racially segregated housing in the city and suburbs. During the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the federal government enacted a series of policies designed to spur home ownership and boost the construction industry. The Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), a program created in 1933 during the Great Depression to provide mortgage assistance to homeowners fac-

ing foreclosure, was operated in a racialized way. HOLC established a rating system for determining the risks associated with granting loans to specific urban neighborhoods. The system was based on four categories of neighborhood quality, with letter and number codes as follows:

First Category	A	Green
Second Category	B	Blue
Third Category	C	Yellow
Fourth Category	D	Red

The top two categories received the lion's share of HOLC loans. These were neighborhoods that were considered to be "new, homogeneous, and in demand in good times and bad" (green) and those that "had reached their peak" but were stable and still desirable (blue). The bottom two categories received the fewest loans. Massey and Denton observe that the HOLC system "undervalued older central city neighborhoods that were racially or ethnically mixed." Indeed, every neighborhood with a black population, no matter how small, was coded red. HOLC ratings were assigned to every block in the city, and this information was used to prepare color-coded "Residential Security Maps." This is the origin of the term and practice of "redlining."

The greatest impact of the HOLC mortgage program was in serving as a model for other institutions in the private and public sector. For example, private banks utilized the rating system in making their loan decisions, and the use of the "Residential Security Maps" became widespread throughout the metropolitan area. Most importantly, the HOLC system was institutionalized in the loan programs of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), established in 1937, and in the Veterans Administration programs, authorized in the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the G.I. Bill. These two programs are acknowledged as a major force driving suburbanization during the post–World War II period. The FHA and VA housing initiatives guaranteed loans made by private banks, making it less costly for working- and middle-class people to purchase homes. These loans helped to lower the down payment required and extended the length of the repayment period, resulting in lower monthly payments for homeowners. These programs generally favored suburban development and – because they were based on the HOLC rating system – encouraged racial segregation. The FHA generally provided substantial loans for the construction of new homes in the suburbs but not for purchasing or remodeling homes in the central city.

According to Massey and Denton, the key to the FHA's reinforcing segregated housing patterns was that "the agency followed the HOLC's earlier lead in racial matters; it too manifested . . . a concern with the presence of what the 1939 FHA *Underwriting Manual* called 'inharmonious racial or nationality groups.' " According to this manual, "if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes." And, as noted above, the FHA advocated the use of restrictive covenants to ensure "neighborhood security," even after the Supreme Court in 1948 invalidated their enforcement. Private builders and developers, relying on the availability of FHA and VA loans for prospective home buyers, complied with these racially restrictive practices.

HIGHWAY DEVELOPMENT

Federal policies regarding highway development and urban renewal contributed to the color line in housing, both urban and suburban. Charles M. Lamb discussed the role of federal highway funding on the development of suburbs across the United States and on housing segregation. According to Lamb, the interstate highway system that began during the Eisenhower administration (1953–1961), along with the dramatic expansion of automobile use in the 1960s, made it possible for whites who worked in the city "to escape to surrounding areas to live and raise their families." In addition, some of these federally funded highway projects removed minorities from certain neighborhoods and segregated them elsewhere.

In Detroit, federal and local highway projects in the late 1940s and the 1950s resulted in expressways that had a significant impact on both the city and suburbs. Densely populated black neighborhoods were destroyed to make room for the Chrysler, Lodge, and Ford Freeways, without providing sufficient alternative housing for the displaced residents. At the same time, these new expressways permitted white suburbanites to commute to downtown areas for work or recreation while maintaining racially exclusive communities in the suburbs.

Also devastating to black neighborhoods were urban renewal programs in the 1950s and 1960s, which condemned large areas of Detroit inhabited by poor and working-class blacks to make room for private development of middle-class housing. Like the highway projects, these "slum clearance" programs razed "blighted areas" without providing the residents with alternative places to live.

PUBLIC HOUSING

The primary means for addressing the displacement problem became the construction of public housing developments, but this proved to be a major point of contention. Even before the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s, there was significant conflict over using public housing developments as a means to deal with housing shortages. President Roosevelt's New Deal programs provided federal assistance for building low-income housing but left program implementation to local officials, who generally sought to maintain racial segregation in the developments. Moreover, the federal initiative for greater investment in public housing clashed with another important New Deal value – the commitment to provide financial subsidies for individuals to construct and purchase single-family homes, as reflected in the FHA and VA programs. Not surprisingly, developers and realtors also were adamantly opposed to public housing initiatives for fear that this would undercut the private housing market. But there also was significant opposition from homeowners.

Sojourner Truth Housing Project

These conflicts over public housing and private development increased racial tensions and, ultimately, resulted in violence. A prime example is the creation of the Sojourner Truth housing project in northeast Detroit in 1941–1942, in the Seven Mile–Fenelon neighborhood. White homeowners mounted fierce opposition to building the project, while civil rights and pro–public housing groups lobbied housing officials to designate the project for black families to alleviate the housing shortage. After initially designating the housing project to be for white families, under pressure, housing officials changed course and decided that it would be open to black occupants. Ironically, the white residents of the Seven Mile–Fenelon neighborhood who opposed the project were joined briefly by middle-class black residents from a community nearby. What explains this unlikely coalition? Some of Detroit's middle-class blacks, like their white counterparts, were concerned about the potential negative impact of public housing on their property values, and they too strongly supported the New Deal value of private, single-family housing. As a result, these black residents formed community associations to influence the FHA to support the development of single-family homes in their neighborhoods. The conflict over the Sojourner Truth housing project erupted in violence in February of 1942 when the first black families moved in. Forty people were injured and 220 arrested. Following this incident, the local housing authority established a policy requiring that racial segregation in public housing projects be maintained.

Eight Mile–Wyoming

While the Sojourner Truth controversy was a major episode, Sugrue identifies the primary battleground in the 1930s and 1940s for the two competing visions of federal housing policy – public housing versus single-family homes – as the Eight Mile–Wyoming area of northwest Detroit, a modest black settlement. Eight Mile Road remains a strong racial symbol even today, as many residents of the Detroit metropolitan area recognize it as the dividing line between black and white Detroit. The name also became part of the national popular culture in 2002, when white rapper and Detroit native Eminem starred in *8 Mile*, a semi-autobiographical movie that helps to symbolize the racial boundary characterizing the city.

In the late 1930s, black residents of Eight Mile–Wyoming were unsuccessful in their attempts to obtain federal assistance for home improvement and construction, and they formed neighborhood associations to lobby the FHA. By the early 1940s, their goals clashed with those of private developers, city officials, and public housing advocates. Developers wanted to build a white subdivision next to a black neighborhood, but they were not eligible for FHA funding because the location was adjacent to an area classified as "high-risk." The solution was to build a massive wall – a foot thick and six feet high – on the property line separating the two neighborhoods. (Parts of the wall still stand today – a continuing reminder of the physical and psychological racial boundaries in metropolitan Detroit.) City officials initially were interested in building an airport in the area, but they

eventually chose another location. Public housing advocates pushed the planning commission to develop public housing in the area. Eventually a compromise was reached: temporary war housing was constructed and FHA subsidies for single-family homes were permitted.

For the most part, Detroit's working- and middle-class whites were successful in pressuring local officials to refrain from building public housing in their neighborhoods. In addition, attempts to persuade all- or nearly all-white suburban communities to accept public housing projects also were soundly defeated. As Sugrue notes, for many whites, the term "public housing" became synonymous with "Negro housing."

Dearborn and Orville Hubbard

In the 1940s, the city of Dearborn and its mayor, Orville Hubbard, became potent symbols of hostility to public housing in suburban Detroit. Dearborn was the location of a major Ford plant that employed a significant number of black workers during World War II. When federal officials proposed a project to house these workers, Dearborn officials vehemently objected. In 1944, the city council passed an anti–public housing resolution, and throughout his thirty-two-year tenure, Hubbard promised to keep Dearborn "lily white." He used inflammatory rhetoric to make his point. Referring to federal public housing officials as "goddam nigger-lover guys," he declared that "Housing the Negroes is Detroit's problem" and "When you remove garbage from your backyard, you don't dump it in your neighbor's." Not surprisingly, federal officials chose another site for the wartime project.

BELLE ISLE RIOT

Between the Sojourner Truth riot in 1942 and the controversy surrounding the Eight Mile–Wyoming community in 1943–1944, racial tensions in the city reached a boiling point. The most serious clash occurred in June 1943 at Belle Isle Park, a large city park located on an island in the Detroit River and frequented by members of both races. The riot began after fights broke out between young blacks and whites inside the park in the afternoon and on the bridge back to Detroit in the evening. Subsequently, blacks and whites engaged in street battles in downtown Detroit and in a black community known as Paradise Valley. Blacks looted white-owned stores, and whites retaliated the next day with attacks on blacks. In three days of disorder, 34 people were killed, 675 were injured, and nearly 1,900 were arrested before federal troops could restore order. The Belle Isle Riot, one of the worst in the United States in the twentieth century, led to the creation of the Mayor's Interracial Committee to reduce racial tensions, but the city initially did little to address the main underlying causes of racial inequality – housing and employment. And neither the riot nor the conditions preceding it dampened black migration to Detroit. (See Table 2.3)

BLOCKBUSTING

Racial clashes in the city intensified in the 1950s and 1960s as blacks continued to move beyond existing racial boundaries. In the mid-to-late 1940s, black elites moved out of the inner city to more exclusive areas within Detroit, and by the early 1950s, middle- and working-class blacks with steady employment also began to move to previously all-white neighborhoods. After the Supreme Court's 1948 decision on restrictive covenants, open housing advocates, including the Mayor's Interracial Committee, fought to abolish discriminatory housing. They sought to end blockbusting, a tactic that changed racial boundaries while simultaneously increasing profits for real estate brokers. After helping a black family move to an all-white neighborhood, brokers would inform white homeowners that their property values would decrease. Having helped create a panic among whites, brokers would persuade them to sell their homes at lower prices and then would resell them to black buyers at higher prices. As more homes changed hands, the racial character of the neighborhood changed as well. Another blockbusting tactic Sugrue mentions involved "paying a black woman to walk her baby through a white neighborhood to fuel suspicion of black residential 'takeover.'" With blockbusting, neighborhoods shifted from all-white, to predominantly black, to all-black within a short period of time. Many of these previously all-white communities were very close to the borders of black neighborhoods, so homeowners there became prime targets for blockbusting agents.

The challenge to Detroit's housing boundaries also illustrated class divisions among its black residents. Some members of the black elite and black middle class also sought to disassociate themselves from

lower-class blacks. This is not surprising, given the potential impact of negative racial stereotypes on their opportunities for advancement.

HOMEOWNERS' ASSOCIATIONS

As blacks sought entry into all-white neighborhoods, some white homeowners attempted to defend themselves against what they perceived as a black invasion. The resistance to open housing initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s had its origin in the homeowners' movement, which began in the 1940s. Between 1943 and 1965, white Detroiters created nearly two hundred grassroots organizations, also known as civic associations, protective associations, improvement associations, and homeowners' associations. Although not created initially for the purpose of racial exclusion, by the 1950s, as more working-class whites became homeowners, the issues of race and housing became intertwined in their minds. These groups, therefore, worked to maintain the racial homogeneity of their neighborhoods. They cited concerns about conditions in the ghetto, as well as fears of crime and racial intermingling. Home ownership became synonymous with citizenship, and homeowners' associations, co-opting the language of protest movements, began to emphasize "homeowners' rights."

The 1948 *Shelley* and *Sipes* decisions on restrictive covenants and the 1949 election of Albert Cobo as mayor of Detroit were critical developments for the movement. The homeowners' groups found a great ally in Cobo, who served from 1950 to 1957. He appointed members of the groups to city commissions concerned with issues of housing, race relations, and urban planning and development. He also weakened and renamed the Mayor's Interracial Committee, including appointing a strong neighborhood association advocate as its head. Cobo's election and influence was particularly striking, given that he was a Republican in a Democratic, strongly union city.

The strong influence of the homeowners' groups on local politics is also seen in their ability to get a Homeowners' Rights Ordinance placed on the ballot in 1964. The ballot drive was spearheaded by Thomas Poindexter, a local Democratic Party activist who became known as the "Home Owners' Champion" and who was elected to the Detroit Common Council that same year. The ordinance was meant to preserve white homeowners' perceived right to uphold segregated housing and to discriminate in real estate sales. This effort was a

tremendous success, as voters approved the proposal by a margin of 55 to 45 percent. However, a year later, the Wayne County District Court declared the ordinance unconstitutional, and it never was implemented.

Although African American civil rights activists and their white allies organized to resist discrimination in housing and other areas, Sugrue notes that homeowners' groups continued to exert considerable influence on local and state politics. "White Detroit groups pressured local politicians to oppose civil rights legislation. Their votes played a crucial role in the defeat of Michigan's Democratic governor, G. Mennen Williams, in 1966, and in the defeat of local referenda to raise taxes to pay for Detroit's increasingly African American public schools."

VIOLENCE

One of the most potent weapons associated with the homeowners' movement to resist housing integration was violence, directed especially toward "black pioneers," the first newcomers to all-white neighborhoods. Sugrue reports that between World War II and the 1960s, "white Detroiters instigated over two hundred incidents against blacks moving into formerly all-white neighborhoods, including harassment, mass demonstrations, picketing, effigy burning, window breaking, arson, vandalism, and physical attacks." These attacks peaked between 1953 and 1957 and again in the early 1960s. The incidents usually followed association meetings, and the violence was not random but was organized and widespread. Attacks occurred in nearly every racially changing neighborhood, but they were most prevalent in the three white predominantly working-class areas where residents were members of the most powerful homeowners' groups.

SUBURBAN RESISTANCE

White Detroiters were not alone in resisting racially integrated housing; as the earlier example from Dearborn demonstrates, the suburbs were not welcoming to blacks, either. Farley, Danziger, and Holzer observe: "No other Detroit suburb has a history of racial exclusion as thoroughly documented as that of Dearborn, but very few African Americans moved to the suburban ring during or after World War II (see Table 2.2). Those who sold real estate cooperated with the offi-

cials of suburban governments and school systems to convey the message that Detroit's suburbs did not welcome black homeowners or renters." Population figures from 1970, the year that *Milliken* began, bear this out. Dearborn, Warren, and Livonia were the three largest Detroit suburbs. Of 400,000 residents in these three communities, only 186 were black – 13 in Dearborn, 41 in Livonia, and 132 in Warren. In addition, for the other twenty-four suburbs with populations of 35,000 or more, in all but two – Inkster and Highland Park – the black population was less than 3 percent; most had less than 1 percent. Again, Mayor Orville Hubbard of Dearborn represented the most prominent face of suburban resistance to integration. In 1948, he opposed even a private housing development project for upper-middle-class residents out of fear that it would include black residents. Before the project was voted on, he dispatched city employees to distribute leaflets that read:

KEEP NEGROES OUT OF DEARBORN
PROTECT YOUR HOME AND MINE!
VOTE NO ON THE ADVISORY VOTE

Voters rejected the proposal. In a 1956 interview with a Montgomery, Alabama, newspaper, Hubbard explained his community's ability to keep blacks out:

A. We say it's against the law to live here. They say, "You know what the Supreme Court says." I tell them we're talking about the law of custom, the law of habit.
Q. Do you mean a city law?
A. The unwritten law.
Q. In other words, all the property owners would have to be in agreement with you?
A. Well, that's why I'm still mayor – 15 years.
Q. They just won't sell to Negroes?
A. That's the way you do it.

Violence was not as prevalent an exclusionary tool in the suburbs as it was in the city of Detroit. Public policies and real estate practices

that reinforced segregated housing, municipal boundaries that kept services contained within each suburban community, and the refusal of suburban governments to participate in regional/metropolitan government projects made violent attacks less necessary. Sugrue concludes, "Residents of suburbs lived in communities whose boundaries were firmly established and governmentally protected, unlike their urban counterparts who had to define and defend their own fragile borders."

There were, nevertheless, some incidents of violence connected to black attempts to move to all- or nearly all-white suburbs. For example, when a black family bought a house in Sterling Heights in 1964, it was destroyed by fire even before they moved in. Three years later in Warren, a mob of whites threw stones and broke windows at the home of an interracial couple who recently had moved there. The police dispersed the crowd but did not arrest any of the offenders. There were some attempts at interracial cooperation to achieve integrated housing in the suburbs through the establishment of human relations organizations, particularly in Livonia and Royal Oak. But as the population statistics in Table 2.2 show, those efforts met with extremely limited success.

A Ticking Time Bomb

Although from outward appearances it may not have seemed so, one could argue that by the mid-1960s Detroit was ripe for a major confrontation like the 1943 Belle Isle riot. Sure enough, Detroit had escaped the kind of disorder that swept through Harlem in 1964 and the Watts area of Los Angeles in 1965. And, for a variety of reasons – in spite of its economic, political, social, and racial problems – Detroit was thought to be immune from a major race riot. It was the only city in the nation at the time with more than one African American member of the United States House of Representatives (John Conyers and Charles Diggs). In 1966, *Look* magazine and the National Municipal League named Detroit an All-America City, and Jerome Cavanagh, who was elected mayor in 1962 with strong support from black voters, was successful in bringing in millions of dollars in federal funding for local programs. Under his leadership, the city obtained $200

million in federal grants for jobs, job training, recreational activities, and other projects. Cavanagh also worked to integrate the predominantly white police force, which had been a longstanding source of tension and hostility in the black community. Furthermore, despite the problems of economic decline and workplace discrimination, some black Detroiters managed to obtain relatively secure, good-paying jobs and were able to purchase their own homes, albeit on a segregated basis. In addition, Detroit was a center of civil rights activism in the early 1960s. The Detroit branch of the NAACP, with 20,000 members, was the largest in the country. The Detroit Council for Human Rights organized a successful freedom march in June 1963, two months before the famous March on Washington where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. King gave an early version of this speech at the Detroit march and, with Mayor Cavanagh, led 125,000 participants from Woodward Street to a rally at Cobo Hall. At the time, it was the largest rally on behalf of civil rights in the nation's history.

On the surface, therefore, Detroit appeared to be in a state of enlightened calm. But this masked reality. As noted earlier, much of the city's federal funding was devoted to urban renewal and highway projects, programs that destroyed black neighborhoods and displaced black residents. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer describe this. The expressways permitted white Detroiters and suburbanites to "ride over or around the city's black poverty on the way to shop or play or work downtown." As a result, frustration and anger built in the black community. "The talk on the corner was of black workers being kept in the heat of the foundries and off the assembly lines, and, once on the lines, away from the supervisory jobs that could be the ticket out of the ghetto. There were still many jobs, neighborhoods, places of business, where blacks were not welcome. To many, Motown was a hostile place." Added to this mix was an emerging militant black leadership responding to the discontent, competing for attention with mainline civil rights groups like the NAACP. These dynamics created an environment whereby a single spark ignited a raging fire.

The 1967 "riot" began after the Detroit police raided a "blind pig," an illegal after-hours nightclub in one of the city's largest black neighborhoods in the wee hours of a Sunday morning in July. Tempers

flared, and before long, fires, looting, and vandalism rocked a six-block area of the city. Over a five-day period, the police arrested over 7,200 people, 43 people (33 blacks and 10 whites) were killed, and property damage was in the millions. The violence caught many Detroit residents off guard; for others, however, the disorder was not only not surprising but in many respects predictable. In an interview for the *Eyes on the Prize* television documentary series, Ron Scott, a black Detroiter, described the situation this way: "Inside of most black people there was a time bomb. There was a pot that was about to overflow, and there was rage that was about to come out. And the rebellion just provided an opportunity for that. I mean, why else would people get upset, cops raiding a blind pig. They'd done that numerous times before. But people just got tired of it. And it just exploded." The Kerner Commission's report on civil disorder in the cities affirmed Scott's observation. "Many grievances in the Negro community result from the discrimination, prejudice and powerlessness which Negroes often experience. They also result from the severely disadvantaged social and economic conditions of many Negroes as compared with those of whites in the same city and, *more particularly, in the predominantly white suburbs*" [emphasis added].

Scholars, politicians, and average citizens continue to disagree about whether the civil unrest and disorder in Detroit and other cities in the 1960s should be viewed as a racial rebellion aimed at bringing about social reform or simply as mass lawlessness and criminal behavior. Whatever the case, the 1967 uprising in Detroit only hardened racial lines between blacks and whites in the city and between Detroit blacks and white suburbanites. The population statistics in Tables 2.2 and 2.3 demonstrate that white flight, which had begun many years earlier, intensified as more and more white residents who had sufficient resources left the city to seek what they perceived to be a safer, more secure life in the suburbs. In 1940, the black population of Detroit was 9.2 percent. Largely as a result of white residents relocating from Detroit to the suburbs, that figure increased dramatically in the next two decades—reaching 44.5 percent in 1970.

It is in this context that *Milliken* arises. In a city battered by economic decline, social distress, racial fears and resentment, and racial violence, calls for integrating the public schools provoked strong reac-

tions. And, given the rigid housing segregation that defined the entire Detroit metropolitan area, school integration clearly was going to be a difficult task. This nexus between housing segregation and school segregation is critical to understanding the dynamics at work in *Milliken*. This link will be explored more extensively in Chapters 3 and 5.