

Decades after the 1964 riots, what has changed?

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An unidentified man is taken into custody in July of 1964.

If you go

What: "Facing Race, Embracing Equity" [forum](#)

held by the League of Women Voters.

Where: Asbury First United Methodist Church, 1050 East Avenue, Rochester.

When: 7 to 9 p.m. tonight.

Information: Call Georgia DeGregorio at (585) 787-9692.

To view a photo gallery from

the riots, click on this story at DemocratandChronicle.com.

About Unite Rochester

The entire Unite Rochester series, including stories, pictures, videos, interactive elements and more, is available at DemocratandChronicle.com. In the most recent installment, our investigation found that more can be done to give everybody in the Rochester housing market the opportunity to live where they want.

Unite Rochester seeks to raise awareness about race and find more inclusive ways to work together to solve community problems.

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Nearly 50 years ago, police officers attempted to corral an intoxicated black man at a city block party. An altercation ensued, an angry crowd began to gather, and as dozens became hundreds, bricks started to fly and [cars](#)

[started to topple](#).

The 1964 Rochester race riots had begun.

Three days later, four people were dead and dozens of shops were destroyed in the area around Joseph Avenue. The damages totaled in the millions, and Rochester had earned the distinction of being the first northern city wherein the National Guard had to be called in to help quell a riot.

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The riots, of course, had little to do with a drunk man at a block party. African Americans, whose population in Rochester had quadrupled over the previous 15 years, were living in substandard housing and working low-wage jobs while their children attended inferior schools.

And though police brutality was a perceived injustice widely shared by those in the black community, the riots, many say, were the overflow of a long-simmering anger caused by many of the institutional issues that still exist in Rochester today.

Tonight, nearly a half-century after the first brick was thrown, the League of Women Voters is holding a forum at the Asbury First United Methodist Church, to ask what, if anything, those riots have taught us.

“How are we doing on housing, employment, and education?” asked Georgia DeGregorio, president of the Rochester chapter of the League of Women Voters. “It’s almost 50 years later. What has changed?”

Mixed results

The forum, which will include a partial screening of the documentary July ’64, doesn’t claim to have the answer this deeply complex question.

But for the black community, Census data paints a picture of small progressions obscured by continuing large disparities.

Home ownership among blacks is up, as 36 percent of black households in Monroe County in 2011 were owner-occupied, compared with 25 percent in 1960. But it’s still nowhere close to that of whites, whose owner-occupied rate climbed from 63 percent to 73 percent in that span.

A brutal economy has caused overall employment to more than double from 1960 to 2011: from 3.9 to 8.2 percent. Unemployment among blacks has climbed from 14.2 to 20.8 percent in the same period, and is astronomical compared with whites in Monroe County, whose unemployment rate last year was 5.2 percent.

As for education, the Census estimates that 74.6 percent of blacks aged 25 or older had high school degrees or GEDs in 2010. This is a large jump from 1960, when 23.3 percent of those 25 or older had high school degrees. But blacks today still trail whites in Monroe County, of which 91.7 percent aged 25 or older carry high school degrees or GEDs.

In 1964, the riots were sparked by the feeling that the city was institutionally geared toward maintaining these disparities, and that little was being done to change things. In some neighborhoods, that feeling persists.

“In the area of the city that it occurred, you can see history being repeated with that kind of development of feeling, because there’s such a struggle to improve the areas that really spoke the loudest,” said Clifford Florence Sr., a Rochester minister whose father, Franklin Florence, founded the prominent local civil rights group FIGHT. “The neighborhoods have suffered.”

Progress stalled

One thing that has improved is the communication between the city and the black community, said Darryl Porter, who has been the assistant to the mayor under Robert Duffy and Thomas Richards and as a teenager was among those who participated in the riots.

“I think the city officials back then were arrogant at the time, and felt that there’s no way such a thing could happen in the city of Rochester,” said Porter. “We go back to the old adage of Smugtown, Rochester, and obviously, they weren’t prepared for it.”

Police relations have also improved markedly over the past 50 years, said Walter Cooper, founder of Action for a Better Community and co-founder of the Rochester Urban League.

But progress has stalled in many key areas because the leadership of 50 years ago was much more broad, said Cooper, 84, of Penfield. In the 60s and 70s, the community regularly banded together in wide-reaching fights for civil rights. That’s not something that happens in Rochester today, he said.

“We had a court case in May 1962 where Rochester was declared in violation of de facto school segregation,” said Cooper. “The universal experience, to me, should be that our children’s futures are in jeopardy, but I don’t see anybody (today) going to any lawyers to file an educational malpractice suit. I don’t see any thrust like that.”

Cooper and Florence also pointed to the breakdown of the traditional family structure as a key factor in the black community’s struggles. In 1960, 32 percent of black children grew up in single-parent households. Today, it’s over 70 percent, according to ACT Rochester.

Tonight’s forum won’t solve any problems on its own, but the League of Women Voters is hoping it can seal a few cracks in what many say is a crumbling foundation.

Once the forum breaks down into smaller discussion groups, the first question they’ll ask is: “How do you think an individual can impact something such as housing?”

For those without deep wallets or influence, simply talking is a good first step.

“Enlighten your friends and your families,” said Cooper. “Within a family, rights should be discussed.”