Reports from the Commission on the Los Angeles (Watts) Riots (1965)

The Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles erupted on August 11, 1965, after white police officers stopped a black motorist. When a crowd gathered, the police called in reinforcements and reportedly assaulted some of the crowd with batons. Reaction in the black neighborhood was swift, and rioting lasted for five days. Thirty-four people were killed, hundreds were injured, and approximately $200 million worth of property was destroyed. Most of the rioters lived in the neighborhood, and that simple fact raised many pertinent questions about the state of U.S. race relations in the 1960s. Most analyses of the riot cite high unemployment, overcrowded housing, growing frustration with racism, a sense of hopelessness, and summer heat as contributing causes. Excerpts from one official study appear below. Watts would not be the last inner-city riot of the 1960s, and it was indicative of the increasingly militant nature of many people who sought civil rights.

August 12, 1965

By 12:20 a.m. approximately 50 to 75 youths were on either side of Avalon Blvd. at Imperial Highway, throwing missiles at passing cars and the police used vehicles with red lights and sirens within the riot area perimeter in an effort to disperse the crowd. As they did so, the rock throwing crowd dispersed, only to return as the police left the scene. Some of the older citizens in the area were inquiring, "What are those crazy kids doing?" A number of adult Negroes expressed the opinion that the police should open fire on the rock throwers to stop their activity. The police did not discharge firearms at rioters.

It was estimated that by 12:30 a.m. 70% of the rioters were children and the remainder were young adults and adults. Their major activity was throwing missiles at passing vehicles driven by Caucasians. One rioter stationed himself a block from the intersection of Avalon Blvd. and Imperial Highway, where the major group of rioters was centered, and signaled to this group whenever a vehicle driven by a Caucasian approached the intersection, so that it could be stoned.

Supervisor Kenneth Hahn and his assistant, Mr. Pennington, drove to the riot scene at about 12:35 a.m. and did not observe road blocks or policemen in the area.

Rioters continued to attack vehicles in the vicinity of Imperial Highway and Avalon Blvd. Some spectators described the crowd as having the appearance of a carnival, with persons acting with abandon and some spectators apparently enjoying the activity as if it were a sporting event.

A dozen vehicles were attacked by about 150 rioters, among them the vehicle of Supervisor Hahn and his assistant, whose automobile was struck by bricks and rocks thrown from the crowd near San Pedro St. and Avalon Blvd. The windshield and one window of his car were broken. Glass cut Mr. Hahn's head.

By 1:00 a.m. the rioters appeared to gather into about four groups of 50 to 100 persons each.
Supervisor Hahn made contact with Sheriff's deputies in the field, utilized a citizen's telephone to communicate with the watch commander at Firestone Station and then rode to that station with Sheriff's deputies. Supervisor Hahn urged action by the LAPD and the Sheriff's Department to prepare for additional trouble which might develop, based upon his view of the rioters. . . .

Two cars were set afire by rioters at the intersection of San Pedro Street and Imperial Highway and at 2:00 a.m. the first looted market was observed at 116th St. and Avalon Boulevard. . . .

Several staff members of the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission went to the disturbed area around midnight of August 11-12. They spoke with persons in the crowd, with youths who were throwing rocks and with police officers. They attempted to get the youth to leave the streets and allow tensions to subside but were unsuccessful. Some of the staff state they observed the uniformed police officers and police cruisers at the police command post were the targets of the crowd. They state they suggested to a police command officer on the scene that the removal of police and police vehicles from the area for the purpose of eliminating the objects of attack would be advisable. They state their suggestions also included that the streets be blocked to prevent through traffic from entering the affected area, but that their suggestions were not immediately accepted. They did notice that the police moved the command post a short time later, although traffic was allowed to continue to move through the affected area and the crowd stoned passing cars. It was noted that only cars driven by Caucasian drivers were victims of the rock throwing. . . .

August 13, 1965

State Assemblyman Mervyn Dymally of Los Angeles, accompanied by Robert Hall, co-chairman of the Non-violent Action Committee, went to the vicinity of Imperial Highway and Avalon Blvd. shortly after midnight on the morning of August 13th for the purpose of assisting in getting people to leave the streets and return to their homes. A group of youths were burning an information center, automobiles were being halted, overturned and burned, two liquor stores were looted, then a doctor's office and a hot-dog stand. Other fires were also started by the rioters and Assemblyman Dymally's requests to the rioters were, to a large measure, ignored. . . .

The fire department attempted to respond to a rubbish fire at Imperial and Central at 12:19 a.m. but its equipment was turned back because rioters would not let firemen proceed and were throwing rocks and bottles at the vehicles. One fireman was hit on the head by a rock thrown by a rioter. . . .

At 1:28 a.m. a church was reported on fire at Imperial Highway and Central Ave. and the fire department dispatched equipment. . . .

At 1:57 a.m. the Los Angeles Sheriff's deputies on perimeter control refused entry into the riot area to fire department units for the safety of the firemen. . . .

At 2:16 a.m. a group of rioters proceeding north on Central Ave., on 120th Street
overturned and burned automobiles in the street. . . .

August 14, 1965

. . . Moneycre Whitmore was shot and killed by police officers at 59th St. and Vermont Ave. while he was allegedly looting (the Coroner's inquest ruled this was a justifiable homicide).

At 12:45 a.m. the National Guard relieved LAPD in the Watts area. . . .

Looters proceeded as far north as 18th St. on Broadway, Avalon Blvd., Main St. and Central Avenue, looting and burning as they proceeded northward from the areas previously struck by the rioters. Arrests in large numbers were being made by the police.

At 12:55 a.m. two suspects drove an automobile at a high speed into a National Guard skirmish line at Avalon Blvd. and Santa Barbara Ave. The vehicle struck and injured a National Guardsman. General Hill was present and observed the incident. He states the action by the driver was an obvious attempt to run down more than one of the Guardsmen, and one was seriously hurt. At that time the National Guardsmen had also been fired on by rioters in other places. Up to this point they were supplied with rifle ammunition but had been ordered not to place the ammunition in their rifles. On witnessing the incident at Avalon Blvd. and Santa Barbara Ave., General Hill personally issued the order that all National Guardsmen were to load their rifles with live ammunition. Bayonets were affixed to rifles. . . .

Document Analysis

This excerpt is from testimony presented to the commission set up by the governor of California to investigate the riots. How do you imagine this account would differ from that of a Watts resident?

Whites were obviously targets during the riots, but how do you explain the destruction of a neighborhood by its residents?