



The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit

Thomas J. Sugrue

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit

Thomas J. Sugrue

The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit Thomas J. Sugrue

Once America's "arsenal of democracy," Detroit has become the symbol of the American urban crisis. In this reappraisal of America's dilemma of racial and economic inequality, Thomas Sugrue asks why Detroit and other industrial cities have become the sites of persistent racialized poverty.

The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit Details

Date : Published August 21st 2005 by Princeton University Press (first published December 1st 1996)

ISBN : 9780691121864

Author : Thomas J. Sugrue

Format : Paperback 375 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Sociology, Cities, Urban Studies, Politics, Urban, Geography, Race, Urban Planning, Academic

 [Download The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit Thomas J. Sugrue

From Reader Review *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* for online ebook

Bryan Craig says

This is a powerful history of Detroit before the infamous 1967 riot. Historian Sugrue lays out an effective argument that Detroit was crumbling economically and systemic racism preyed on more blacks due to migration in the late 1940s and 1950s. All these economic and racial changes made whites nervous and they responded. Readers will learn a lot from this important book.

Vincent says

Thomas J. Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* is a rich, detailed tragedy of a once proud city. In America, Detroit has become synonymous with the concept of urban failure. It has been seen as a metropolitan blight on the American landscape, pocked with foreclosed homes, the lifeless husks of factories, and other signs of economic ruin. Inextricably tied to this perception is the issue of race, as African Americans have long been symbolic of the moral, social, and economic shortcomings that suburbanites now refer to as culturally "urban." How did this come to be? Sugrue follows the various threads that led to our modern conceptions of race as it relates to an urban setting and to the causes of Detroit's, and by extension similar northern cities, plight. Sugrue argues "that the coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in... the period from the 1940s to the 1960s... set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America today," and that "Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of the inequality." Detroit's decline was a result of numerous factors, including automation, deindustrialization, chronic unemployment, and housing shortages, and its racial divide should be understood in terms of the postwar discrimination that regularly targeted and limited the advancements of blacks.

For a detailed look at Sugrue's argument, click the spoiler section.

(view spoiler)

Sugrue advances existing scholarship by providing deeper insight into the causes of Detroit's decline. He does this in a number of ways. Firstly, Sugrue's examination "suggests that the origins of the urban crisis are much earlier than social scientists have recognized." He also claims that his focus, urban economic decline,

“has remained largely absent from historical accounts of the 1940s and 1950s.” Similarly, he writes, “The history of race relations and civil rights in the North remains... largely unexamined by historians.” Sugrue’s assessment remedies these scholarly deficiencies.

Urban Crisis vividly articulates the causes, experiences, and effects of Detroit’s decline. Sugrue gives the reader a glimpse into the lives of blacks and whites as they navigated a shifting landscape which was transforming in terms of race, economy, and housing. With clarity of narrative, interpretation, and presentation, Sugrue guides the reader through the struggles and occasional victories of working class Detroiters, but always we know that the story is meant to end tragically. For many, Detroit is a casualty of America’s twentieth-century industrial age, and though the history and present condition of the city is dark, Sugrue at least insightfully illuminates the path which brought it there, as well as all the ways its fate could have been prevented, or at the very least, softened for its citizens.

Andrea says

Stunning really, searing and beautifully thorough research on race, political economy and the urban fabric of Detroit.

He engages with some central questions: what the hell happened to rust belt cities, how did they turn from industrial centers to economic backwaters, how did the ghetto form, how did segregation and racism persist? He then answers these questions, in the process knocking the almost the entire body of literature on the 'underclass' out of the ballpark. He does build on those that contained some structural analysis, but looks at a multiplicity of structural forces rather than just one or two (like deindustrialization or racism) and also follows a more historical approach, seeing the origins of the urban crisis in the 1940s and 50s. He does not avoid the question of agency -- and there is so much in here about grassroots action -- but paraphrases Marx when he says "Economic and racial inequality constrain individual and family choices. They set the limits of human agency. Within the bounds of the possible, individuals and families resist, adapt, or succumb." His main thesis:

Detroit's postwar urban crisis emerged as the consequence of two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality.

I find his work most interesting in the way he looks at race and space, though I don't fully agree with his view of race. He writes "Discrimination by race was a central fact of life in the postwar city. But the dimensions, significance, and very meaning of race differed depending on its cultural, political, and economic context. ... Racial ideology, a shifting and fluid popular vernacular of race, served as the backdrop to the relationship between blacks and whites in the postwar city." Discrimination and ideologies of race are indeed shifting things articulated with cultural, political and economic context, but never a backdrop. The opportunity this book misses is a deeper theorisation of the way the events it relates also formed racial ideologies. This is not to deny that ideology also worked on more of a national level, and that ideas of blackness

In mid-twentieth-century Detroit, as in the rest of the nation, racial identities rested on widely held assumptions about the inferior intelligence of blacks, notions that blacks were physiologically better suited for certain types of work, and stereotypes about black

licentiousness, sexual promiscuity, laziness, and dependence.

did not shape history as much as ideas of whiteness

On the other side was the persistent association of whiteness with Americanism, hard work, sexual restraint, and independence. These assumptions about racial difference were nourished by a newly assertive whiteness

He argues that in addition to culture, "Perhaps most important in shaping the concept of race in the postwar 'period, I argue, were local and national politics. Race was as much a political as a social construction." But for me, the most interesting thing about this is that he is the first (that I have seen) to deeply examine how race and space intertwine, and the consequences of this third factor in conceptions of race:

Perceptions of racial differences were not, I argue, wholly, or even primarily, the consequences of popular culture. If they were, they would not have had such extraordinary staying power. In the postwar city, blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition. The physical state of African American neighborhoods and white neighborhoods in Detroit reinforced perceptions of race. The completeness of racial segregation made ghettoization seem an inevitable, natural consequence of profound racial differences. The barriers that kept blacks confined to racially isolated, deteriorating, inner-city neighborhoods were largely invisible to white Detroiters. To the majority of untutored white observers, visible poverty, overcrowding, and deteriorating houses were signs of individual moral deficiencies, not manifestations of structural inequalities. White perceptions of black neighborhoods provided seemingly irrefutable confirmation of African American inferiority and set the terms of debates over the inclusion of African Americans in the city's housing and labor markets.

Much later in the book he goes on to say

"Racial incidents encoded possession and difference in urban space. Residents of postwar Detroit carried with them a cognitive map that helped them negotiate the complex urban landscape. In a large, amorphous twentieth-century city like Detroit, there were few visible landmarks to distinguish one neighborhood from another, But residents imposed onto the city's featureless topography all sorts of invisible boundaries-boundaries shaped by intimate association, by institutions (like public-school catchment areas or Catholic parish boundaries), by class, and, most importantly, by race.

The sustained violence in Detroit's neighborhoods was the consummate act in a process of identity formation. White Detroiters invented communities of race in the city that they defined spatially. Race in the postwar city was not just a cultural construction, Instead, whiteness, and by implication blackness, assumed a material dimension, imposed onto the geography of the city. Through the drawing of racial boundaries and through the use of systematic violence to maintain those boundaries, whites reinforced their own fragile racial identity."

How fascinating is that? And depressing. I read this with a little pit of fear that I would run across family members in the accounts of furious blue collar white Catholic homeowners (I didn't).

But what makes this book so fantastic is its breadth. It looks at space and segregation, but also at work and the process of deindustrialisation, it looks at struggle -- both that of African Americans and the grassroots

efforts of whites to preserve their neighborhoods, it looks at layers of party politics both local and national, it looks at developers and real estate agents. It looks at gender, at class divisions in the African American community, at union politics and schisms and the way that race consistently trumped class and how homeownership shifted working class consciousness, at the development of discourses around rights and property and housing, shifts in the meaning of liberalism.

This is scholarship to aspire to, the kind of research we need to understand the complexities of race in our cities today and think about effective struggle, and I look forward to reading it again, as its breadth ensures I will find a whole new excitement in it I am sure.

Erica says

When did Detroit go wrong? The 1967 riots are often seen as the beginning of the city's tragic decline, but Sugrue argues that the seeds of downfall were sown much earlier - in the 1940s. A toxic mix of elements: the dispersal of the auto industry away from the city, along with institutional and cultural racism that limited the options of black Southerners who had come to Detroit seeking a new life after the war, resulted in the implosion still visible today.

As someone who grew up in suburban Detroit, Sugrue's account gave me a new perspective on my family's place in this shared history. The stories that Metro Detroiters have told themselves about the causes of the city's decline are missing vital elements: the auto industry's abandonment of the city starting in the 1950s, the fraught racial identity of working class white Detroiters trying to escape their ethnic past, the rampant housing and job discrimination that kept blacks corralled in ghettos they couldn't escape from even if they had the means, the vandalism and intimidation perpetrated by white housing associations against black households attempting to cross racial barriers, the role that class played in determining the fortunes of residents, the way that segregation has transposed itself onto Detroit's suburbs (essentially becoming a more fortified version of Detroit's white neighborhoods). Segregation is a problem of every American city, but in Detroit it remains especially acute.

Sugrue has understandably chosen a very specific timeframe, but I found myself wishing he had widened the lens a bit to question the fundamental economic and environmental sustainability of basing an entire region's economy on a product - the automobile - whose use propagates a ruinous planning model so evident in Detroit itself.

This story continues to play itself out. Despite glimmers of hope, no one is particularly optimistic about Detroit's future. Any progress will have to come to terms with the city's past. Sugrue's book should be required reading for everyone from SE Michigan.

Mr. Monahan says

Newark and Detroit are inextricably linked as Northern cities with significant poor black populations that become devastated by riots in the 1960s that. According to many scholars these similarities have much to do with the impact which the postwar process of deindustrialization had on both cities. Therefore, in many ways

a study of Newark is significant to Detroit, and vice versa. Thomas Sugrue has compiled a meticulously researched and supported analysis of Detroit's postwar racial history in *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Sugrue differentiates between three distinct explanations for the urban crisis which develops in Detroit.

First he cites the older and "influential" group of scholars that explain urban crisis by focusing on the cultural values of the poor and minorities (sociocultural). Second is the structural explanation that has taken root in the wake of Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Here Sugrue cites two structural camps, one identifiable with Wilson's emphasis on "economic restructuring"; the other group gravitating toward racial discrimination in urban structure, such as the work of Gary Orfield and Douglas Massey. A third body of scholarship seeks to explain the urban crisis by focusing on politics during the era of urban marginalization in social policy.

Sugrue places his scholarship within the general body of urban literature which looks toward structure; however his study is unique for placing the origin of urban inequality as far back as the 1940s, and for citing a (thoroughly researched) multiplicity of structural forces—race, economics, and politics in particular—for setting the "limits of human agency."

I argue that the coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, set the stage for the fiscal, social, and economic crises that confront urban America today....builds on the insights of those who offer structural explanations of urban inequality.

Sugrue is dissatisfied with any explanation that focuses solely on racial factors, because race is a "transhistorical constant rather than a historical variable." He charges these "ahistorical" scholars with oversimplifying complex realities in order to present a politically or economically driven pathology of "monocausal discrimination." Sugrue does not deny racial discrimination as a factor in his narrative, but he does relegate it to the "backdrop" and uses it to explain "individual moral deficiencies" and not "structural defects." Ultimately, the driving force of Sugrue's urban crisis narrative is the "unequal distribution of power and resources" and the struggle of the poor to gain access to that power; to resist and survive. In 2007, Sugrue, with Andrew P. Goodman, took up the subject of New Jersey urban crisis particular to Plainfield, New Jersey in 1967. In *Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North* the authors argue that the "civil disorders of the 1960s were the consequence of a long, unresolved history of racial tension in the suburbs, the failure of local government to address the grievances of African Americans, and the growing currency of a militant rhetoric of self-determination and rebellion among black suburban youth."

Gramarye says

This book, written in the mid-1990s, is still as relevant and applicable for reading today as it was two decades ago. Looking at Detroit as a specific case study, it picks apart the many tangled threads of race relations; class differences; the influence of religion; the decisions of business and industry; and the actions (and inactions) of the local, state, and federal government to reveal the reasons why one particular city -- once the shining example of America's productivity -- collapsed under the weight of chronic un- and underemployment and deep structural inequalities. As someone who grew up outside a fading industrial city with its own racial strife and employment problems, I found myself nodding along sadly as I read Sugrue's work...and even wincing as some of his examples and conclusions struck rather too close to home.

Dan says

Sugrue presents a contrarian view of 20th century Detroit. While the post-World War II era is often remembered as a time of unmitigated prosperity, Sugrue's analysis contends that Detroit was always fragile, even if just under the surface. He points to social tensions from overwhelming racial discrimination in housing and employment, wanton disregard for the city (and state) by the automobile industry, the poaching of jobs by other states, and the Federal government's encouragement of decentralization.

While specific racial issues compose the bulk of this book, Sugrue spends considerable time on economic issues that transcend race (but ultimately exacerbate racial issues). Probably the biggest omission — particularly in light of Sugrue's assertions about housing — is a further analysis of highway development and urban renewal projects. However, either of those topics could easily fill a book on their own.

In my opinion, the story of 20th century Detroit is tragedy on a grand scale, an object indictment of "The American Century," a horrific commentary on race relations, and a stinging rebuke of corporate capitalism. Regardless of your perspective, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* is a highly engaging and thought-provoking assessment of The Motor City.

Megan says

As many other raters have mentioned, this book is an eye-opening, must-read account for anyone interested in Detroit, Urban Studies, or the politics of race. I'm surprised to find some have called it dry, because I actually found it to be pretty readable... And I often give up on super academic, jargon-laden works.

I loved this book, but I thought that the analysis of automation and decentralization by manufacturers in Detroit (particularly the big 3) was extremely biased against corporations. I'm not a fan of corporations myself, but I think it is unfair to couch the decision to automate and disperse operations in racial terms. These decisions certainly affected black workers disproportionately, and as a result perpetuated racial inequalities, but I doubt they were racially motivated—there were sound business reasons why these decisions were necessary to maintain and grow the business in the face of rising competition (the ultimate failure of the big 3 to compete against Japanese auto manufacturers in the 80s suggests they may not have done this sufficiently)... African Americans had been (very unfairly) relegated to the most dangerous positions, and then the factories quite rationally decided to automate these dangerous jobs to avoid unnecessary injury and death... The solution was not to avoid automation, but rather an earlier intervention - at the point when there was discriminatory hiring practices that prevented black people from getting the more desirable, less dangerous, higher-skilled work. If these roles had been open to black workers, then automation would have hit black and white workers more equally.

Similarly - decentralization was not an inherently anti-worker policy, as it ended up creating jobs in other areas of the midwest and south. The problem was that the very, very discriminatory housing market meant black workers were significantly less mobile than white workers, which once again led to inequality. Decentralization would have had a more equitable effect had the housing market been less discriminatory.

In any case, I still found the thesis to be compelling and well-argued. I just wanted to throw up a little bit of

criticism to keep the discussion interesting!

Kb says

Incredibly thorough and depressing study of Detroit's postwar urban crisis. Most tragic are the countless self-destructive decisions and self-fulfilling prophecies made by white Detroiters, including government officials and employers. Detroit is a city that was violently brought down by racial discrimination in many forms, including housing and employment discrimination, divided labor unions, and grassroots racism, especially among working-class Catholics. Detroit is one city that lends itself particularly well to this kind of case study because its postwar demographics are almost completely broken down into black and white. A city like New York, for example, would be much more complicated to analyze. Still, the general path followed by Detroit can be applied to any American city with a large working-class population that was subject to mass de-industrialization and decentralization.

Selmoore Codfish says

This is a powerful book. It was so powerful that it made me want to put it down so that I wasn't impacted by the ways that it pulled at me. Sometimes it was hard to take.

It is an essential book on race relations. It shows the historical context that built up to the riots and why Detroit has become what it is today.

The book has information pre-World War II, but focuses on the time between the war and the 1967 riot. The conclusion shows how the urban versus suburban hostilities developed, and why they have continued so long after that.

Chris says

Sometimes the most telling thing is what they *didn't* teach you in school.

Sugrue clearly did his homework researching this book, and makes a compelling argument for how many of the issues plaguing Detroit (and other American cities) have their roots in deindustrialization, and -- perhaps moreso -- in workplace and housing discrimination that effectively wiped out opportunities for minorities.

David Bates says

In his 1996 work *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* Thomas Sugrue focused on the implications of the racism in the residential and labor markets of Detroit for the city. Key to Sugrue's approach is his view that race is an economically and politically constructed concept that creates an illusion of difference, from which social prejudice arises. In large part *Origins* is framed as a rebuttal to "influential conservative scholars, backed by well-funded think tanks and foundations, [who] have continued to ignore or downplay the political and economic causes of impoverishment. Instead, they have resuscitated theories about racial differences in culture, values and even intelligence. Those arguments -- however discredited by rigorous scholarly research -- continue to appeal to those who believe that the causes and

solutions of social problems start and end with poor people themselves.” Rejecting assumptions about the character and work ethic of the urban poor, Sugrue elaborates the interplay of structural forces and social choices which caused the urban interior of Detroit to stagnate. Beginning his account in the 1940’s when the nation’s manufacturing base began to shift away from the Northern cities, *Origins* tells a story of racial tensions within the working class of Detroit that set white and black against each other in a competition for access to housing and a shrinking pool of industrial jobs.

As African-Americans settled in large numbers in Detroit following World War II, white residents in many cases sought to protect their interests by excluding black migrants from equal access to housing, union membership, employment and financial services. Each deprivation formed an interlocking constraint on the ability of black residents of the city to attain stability and prosperity. Conflict over access to opportunity was exacerbated by ebbing demand for unskilled labor due to factory automation and the decentralization of the auto industry supply chain to suburban communities. Undermined by politicized racial division, constructive programs by the municipal government such as the provision of government housing, which might have ameliorate some of the symptoms of overcrowding and economic dislocation, were enfeebled. Through amid racial violence the familiar contours of today’s shrunken tax base, degenerating infrastructure and struggling inner city took shape.

Tom Schulte says

This is a largely scholarly work with plenty of tables, graphs, and endnotes. The author manages to tip the content to compelling and away from dry, however. This the story of institutional lack of opportunity for African-American Detroiters largely tracked from the WW II-era boom of the city as an industrial 'arsenal' to the eve of the '67 riots. The story of racist loan, real estate, and owner association covenant policies is told on a municipal scale through data with interspersed incidents of particular individuals. It is a sad and disheartening litany of abuses perpetrated upon a population. I understand there are updated and enlarged editions other than this one.

Joseph Stieb says

If you've ever wondered: "Dang, how did our inner cities get to be the way they are today, especially Detroit?" this is a great work for you. Sugrue traces the growth of urban inequality and segregation from WWII to the 1967 riots in Detroit and outlines the deeply rooted causes of the urban crisis.

WWII witnessed a vast expansion of economic opportunity for whites and African-Americans in Detroit with the growth of war industries. African Americans flooded the city from the South, creating a serious housing crisis that the white-dominated city government did little to redress. The postwar period saw a gradual process of deindustrialization, the movement of factories out of the city, and mechanization. Blacks, who had less power in unions and city government, were usually the first to lose their jobs. They also had more trouble gaining access to public housing or New Deal style benefits. For example, the FHA, working through private banks, very rarely offered loans to blacks because they considered them to be too much of a risk. This meant that whites could more easily move up to the middle class while blacks were more likely to be stuck in dead-end neighborhoods. Even if a black family worked hard enough to move into a white neighborhood with better schools and prospects, deep racism and the (mythical) fear of the decline of

property values usually pushed them out. Sugrue's accounts of white homeowners' associations bullying and harassing blacks in their neighborhoods are absolutely shocking and enraging. Stories of teenage boys harassing black neighbors or little girls writing about blacks as dirty thieves in school speak to the depths of racial animosity there. When whites couldn't control the influx of blacks, they tended to retreat to the suburbs, taking a great deal of money with them. Basically, Sugrue shows how opportunities lessened as a whole for all Detroit's and how, for both structural and very human reasons, blacks suffered the most from this decline.

Surge provides a compelling argument that the racism, segregationist housing, and structural economic factors are the basic underlying causes of the urban crisis. He offers a solid antidote to accounts of urban decay that focus on the individual or cultural flaws of African-Americans. His book is stuffed with examples of hard-working people who simply could not overcome the immense structural and human forces arrayed against them. It would be interesting to see how this persistent blocking of upward and outward mobility and the persistent poverty did change African-American culture in the city, possibly creating a feedback loop between culture and . Nevertheless, I'm convinced by Sugrue locating the origins of urban decay largely outside of culture and individual flaws. Sugrue's book is a testimony to the immense work still left to be done in understanding and addressing the causes and racism and inequality in modern America.

Katie Hanna says

I loved this book. It really changed the way I think about race and class and equality, to be honest.
