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# City of Detroit

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**TO:** Detroit City Council

**FROM:** David Whitaker, Director  
Legislative Policy Division 

**RE:** Identifying survivors of the 1943 Belle Isle Race Riot

**DATE:** July 5, 2022

Council Member Coleman A. Young, II requested the Legislative Policy Division (LPD) to draft a report identifying any survivors of the Belle Isle (Detroit MI) Race Riot of 1943, for the purpose of reparations. Due largely to passage of time since the 1943 riot, LPD lacks the resources to identify survivors or the identities of all of the victims. That would be a significant research project that would require a substantial dedicated budget that does not exist.

In the absence of the establishment of an official reparations program, we are unable to predict the segment of population which would qualify to benefit from such a program. Notwithstanding the previous, this report documents LPD's response to this referral.

In the summer of 1943, the Detroit Riot broke out on Belle Isle, eventually spilling into the city. The civil unrest lasted about 24 hours from 10:30 on June 20 to 11:00 p.m. on June 21. Since this tragic event occurred almost 80 years ago, it would be difficult to find survivors and highly unlikely that any remain. However, the victims of the violence have been identified and due to the circumstances surrounding their deaths, it is conceivable – depending on the terms of an eventual reparations program - that a case can be made for reparations by their descendants.

On June 20<sup>th</sup> as the sun set, and as crowds reportedly jammed the Belle Isle Bridge, at least one fist fight broke out between men of different races, which eventually grew into a larger confrontation between groups of Black people and whites, as hundreds of white sailors ran to

join the fight from the nearby naval armory. It took several hours for the police to gain control of the situation.<sup>1</sup>

By midnight, order was restored in the area of the Belle Isle Bridge. But in the early hours of the morning of June 21<sup>st</sup>, due to fast traveling rumors, more violence erupted and spread like wildfire into the streets of the city. African Americans were told that whites had thrown a Black woman and her baby off the Belle Isle Bridge. This information incited Black people to form a mob that moved down Hastings Street then to Woodward Avenue, breaking windows, looting white businesses, and attacking white individuals. Whites were told that Black men had raped a white woman near the same bridge, causing whites to form a mob near the Roxy Theatre on Woodward, attacking Blacks as they exited from city buses on their way to work.

Black motorists were snatched from their cars by white mobs, their cars turned over and burned in the middle of the street as white police officers looked on. The editor of the Michigan Chronicle at this time, Louis E. Martin gave this description of what he believed to be the police departments riot plan at the time “police to swarm into the area occupied by Negroes, disarm the residents and then proceed to outdo the Gestapo in killings and brutalities.”<sup>2</sup>

Police shouted racial epithets, beat innocent Black pedestrians, sprayed whole buildings with automatic gunfire, and shot Black people in the back. Many Black people were shot while running away, or for making insulting remarks to police, or for nothing at all. The police claimed that these shootings were justified since the victims were engaged in looting stores on Hastings Street. Four times as many Blacks were arrested as whites, though blacks were just 10 percent of the population.

The violence ended when President Franklin Roosevelt, at the request of Detroit Mayor Edward Jeffries, Jr, ordered 6,000 federal troops into the city. The troops ended the violence by firmly pushing both Black and white rioters off the main throughfares without firing a shot.

In the end, the city suffered an estimated \$2 million in property damages. \$30 million in today’s dollars. Twenty-five Blacks and nine whites were killed. Of the 25 African Americans who died, 17 were killed by police. Of the nine whites who died, none were killed by police.

Thomas Klug, a historian from Michigan has examined the 1943 riot and assembled the state of Michigan death certificates for the riot victims. He has charted the cause of death, birthplace, address, employer, and place of burial for the victims. Among African Americans, twenty-two died of gunshot wounds; two suffered crushed skulls-likely from stoning, while one died from blood loss after breaking a window. Of the dead African Americans, all but two were born in the south. Eight victims were from Alabama, four from South Carolina and three from Georgia. Some of the dead were returned to their home states for burial, while eleven African Americans

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<sup>1</sup> With respect to all, this report follows the standard convention of capitalizing “Black” as an ethnic signifier of people’s nationality (analogous to American or Arab), but not “white” as a color, and a designation of a socially constructed “race”. Noting that literate white nationalists might regard white as their nationality, rejecting that view is a primary reason for following this standard convention.

<sup>2</sup> <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/race-riot-1943>

were placed in black cemeteries in Macomb County. This information would be valuable in establishing any case for reparations.<sup>3</sup>

Since no reparations programs currently exist on the local, state, or national levels it is premature to even speculate on what a program would look like and the eligible population. However, reparations are defined as “the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury”<sup>4</sup>

It is apparent that in this violence almost 80 years ago, countless numbers of African Americans in Detroit suffered injury and injustices at the hands of police and some paid with their lives.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.metrotimes.com/news/forgotten-history-detroits-1943-race-riot-broke-out-75-years-ago-today-13133006#:~:text=Forgotten%20history%3A%20Detroit%27s,8%3A49%20am>

<sup>4</sup>“Reparation.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reparation>. Accessed 1 Jul. 2022.

