

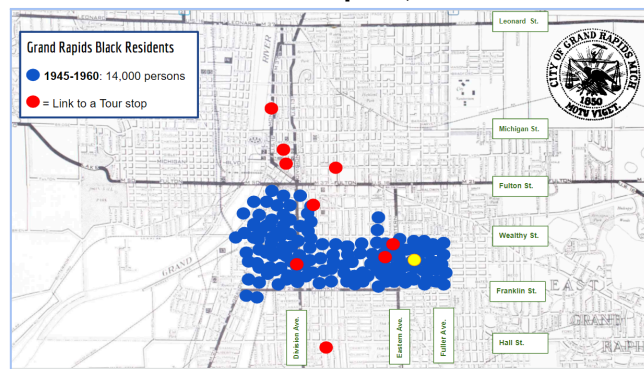
Lead Educator: Matthew Vriesman

In 2022, the Grand Rapids Public Museum partnered with East Kentwood High School teacher Matt Vriesman to develop this lesson based on primary sources in the GRPM Collections and beyond. Matt collaborated with curatorial and education staff to develop this content, and received a stipend for his efforts.

The Grand Rapids Public Museum supports educational efforts in West Michigan and beyond through the use of its Collections and community stories. Find out more or create your own by visiting [GRPMCollection.org](https://www.grpmcollection.org) and clicking on Teacher Galleries.



RIOT OR UPRISING?: “THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNHEARD.” Grand Rapids, MI 1967



Description

“A riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?...in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again.” - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In the late 1960s, white leaders of Grand Rapids prided themselves on the tranquility and basic fairness of West Michigan culture. As civil disturbances erupted in Watts, Newark, and Detroit, Grand Rapids’ leaders were sure that nothing of that sort was possible in their city. Until the summer of 1967, when frustration boiled over in our community.

With this lesson, students will sift through primary sources to examine evidence of the realities of life in the years leading up to 1967, including examples of how Black residents were systematically excluded from jobs, housing, and educational opportunities. Students will take a “virtual tour” of Grand Rapids by following a map linked to artifacts and newspaper stories from the GRPM Collection and beyond.

The powerful ending to this lesson will leave students with a deeper understanding of what Dr. King meant about the “language of the unheard” and why American cities continue to see civil disturbances that revolve around issues of racial injustice in the United States.

Objectives:

- Students will contextualize persistent racial inequalities that continued throughout the civil rights era
- Students will analyze causes of social unrest in American cities in the summer of 1967
- Students will analyze media coverage and descriptions of the social unrest in the summer of 1967

AP U.S. History Unit 8: Period 10: The African American Civil Rights Movement (1960s)

Unit 8: Learning Objective L. Explain how and why various groups responded to calls for the expansion of civil rights from 1960 to 1980.

Historical developments:

- KC-8.2.1.C -Continuing resistance slowed efforts at desegregation, sparking social and political unrest across the nation. Debates among civil rights activists over the efficacy of nonviolence increased after 1965.

Place in the Curriculum: In a A.P. U.S. History course, this material was used the day after discussing passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Materials:

- Slide Deck - https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1-VKG374SKy0WSmzmG5_5LcR1v3F_LoqyVvkv8A2Zr8s/copy. Students will use these for independent work time. We don’t recommend having students open the slides right away. Instead, wait ~25 minutes into the lesson and have them open the slides on their own device when we get to slide 19.
- Student Handout - <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oozjqCsWvRYn-tF69t6FVLPOua-Cu4z5uD0t11qP-0/copy>

Notes: This lesson builds off an [earlier lesson for APUSH unit 7](#). However, this lesson can be used without students having all the background knowledge of the 1920s lesson. In the previous lesson, students learned about the fight against Jim Crow in Grand Rapids in the 1920s. Even though legal victory was achieved in that fight, students will learn that injustice persisted in Grand Rapids throughout the next several decades.

Lesson Plan

1. Lesson Introduction + Essential Question

- a. Cover slides #1-5 briefly, explaining that even though the Voting Rights Act had just passed, racial injustice persisted which led to violent civil unrest demonstrations in American cities.
 - i. Hint: Don't spend too much time here! Yes, there is a lot to unpack, but it is important to get to the lesson which is designed for students to do the "unpacking" on their own!
- b. Introduce central question for the lesson: Should these events be called riots or uprisings? (slide #6)
 - i. Work as a class to define these terms and differentiate their meanings, inviting students to contribute using definitions they search on their computers or devices (slide #7).
 1. After 30-60 seconds, ask for volunteers to share a few key words, what are the differences?
 - ii. After a few student responses, move to slide #8-9 and share the definitions from the web, as well as a few quotes from linguistics experts on the differences in the terms. Prompt students to reflect: **Which words contain a positive connotation? Which words are loaded with negative connotations?** (Slide #10 offers a visual cue of positive/negative words)
- c. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s perspective (slides #11-13)
 - i. By now, Dr. King was one of the most famous men in the entire world. He was known for his non-violent tactics. Day after day, the press asked King to denounce the civil unrest. Prompt students to turn to a partner and predict what they think Dr. King said about the violence (slide #11). **What do you think Dr. King said? What do you think the press expected him to say?**
 - ii. Cover instructions and release students to read and analyze Dr. King's 1967 speech "The Other America." (slide #12 and student worksheet section 1). *The speech excerpt is about 330 words, meaning it will take an average high schooler about 2 minutes to read.*
 1. Discuss the questions and have students share key takeaways as time permits
 - iii. (Slide #13). Deliver key message: Dr. King says it would be unjust to condemn the riots without also condemning the economic and social injustice that caused the riots. He says riots will continue until the underlying causes are addressed.

2. Build the Local, Grand Rapids Context

- a. Introduce the local context by covering slides 14-18.
- b. Main idea: Jim Crow followed Black citizens to the North, and Grand Rapids was no exception. Even though the Michigan Supreme Court struck down Jim Crow in 1927, vast inequalities persisted. Students will be exploring examples that demonstrate this in the following section.

3. Student Investigation - Virtual Tour of primary sources embedded in a Digital Map

- a. Direct students to the slides and tell them to start at slide 19. Tell them to open it to presentation mode, it will work better. They need to start at the yellow dot which will lead them through a few slides about FHA discriminatory practices and "redlining."
- b. You might want to stop them 3 mins into this and make sure that everyone understands what "redlining" is and why homeownership is so key to joining in on the fruits of the American Dream.
- c. There are 10 other red dot "tour stops" around the city. Set a number that you require your students to visit. Some students will go very fast and could hit all 10 in 10-15 mins. I require my students to visit at least 6 of the 10.
- d. On the handout, there is space for students to record a little bit of what they discover. Honestly, students enjoy the format of this lesson enough and engagement is high so I usually have my group skip the answer recording step to save time. You know your students. It might be wise to keep them accountable by recording answers. Your call.
- e. As you realize that students are wrapping up this portion of the lesson. Stop the class and ask for a few volunteers to describe and react to what they learned on the tour stops. Use whatever strategies best fit with your learners to debrief and discuss their findings from the primary source virtual tour.

4. Examine primary sources documenting the unrest in late July 1967 (slides #36-44).

- a. Student Investigation: They will be learning about the unrest in late July of 1967. They will read a brief narrative account, see a bullet point of facts, and a few images. They should stop when they see the stop sign and prepare for a class discussion. You might want them to write down a few thoughts on these questions before discussion begins.
- b. Whole Group Discussion: Recalling the connotations of "riot" and "uprising," have students discuss:
 - i. - Did these events have a purpose? What was it?
 - ii. - Who is most responsible for the destruction?
 - iii. - Evaluate the extent of the legitimacy of the authority that was being rebelled against.
 - iv. - Would you call these events a riot or an uprising?

5. Analyze coverage of these events in the Grand Rapid Press

- a. Student independent work time (slides #44-51). Students should focus on headlines and enlarged excerpts. They will document the language usage in the articles, keeping a tally of the words “riot” and “uprising.”
 - b. While group discussion. Prompts can be found on slide #53 and the last section of the student handout.
6. Reflection
- a. My goal is to end class by putting slides #55-58 on the screen right before the bell. Wherever we are in the lesson, I will leave this time at the end. I will simply get the students quiet and ask them to reflect on the meaning of the following slides while I read the quotes.
 - b. Slide 57, rather awkwardly, is an award Grand Rapids received in 1960 for its commitment to fairness and inclusivity.
 - c. The class will revisit Dr. King’s famous quote about the “language of the unheard ” one last time. This should leave students with a deeper understanding about what Dr. King meant and why American cities continue to see civil disturbances that revolve around issues of race and discrimination in the United States.
7. Extension Activities (*Optional*)
- a. You can find samples of student extension work from Matt Vriesman’s A.P. U.S. History class in this document:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d4UoEPLwBFLA_Yl1qEt3Uq0iB4rzQ6EcRW_86qMFr2s/edit?usp=sharing

Riot or Uprising? : “The Language of the Unheard,” Grand Rapids, 1967

Reflection

1. How do the themes of the story of Grand Rapids reflect the themes of our U.S. history curriculum in the years between 1940-1970? Overall, do you think our city’s history in this period provides more similarities or more differences to the overall theme of U.S. history at this time? ***Was our city an exception?***

2. Respond to one of the two prompts below.

- Did you learn anything new about our community today? Do the themes in this lesson or the primary source evidence you uncovered reflect your experiences in our community?
- How are prejudice and bias created? How do we overcome them?

Response

In our class discussion, many of you shared that your analysis of the primary source evidence differed from the local press analysis of the events in 1967.

Write a newspaper article that reflects your interpretation of events. You may choose to write a response to a specific article (ie: “It Doesn’t Make Sense,” or “Disturbance was No Uprising”) in the form of a “letter to the editor.” Or you may choose to write your own front-page story.

Do you give permission for this to possibly be put on public display at the Grand Rapids Public Museum or website?

Yes

No

Riot or Uprising? : “The Language of the Unheard.” Grand Rapids, MI 1967

Section 1. Dr. Martin Luther King, “The Other America” 1967-1968

Over and over, the press reached out to Dr. King, the prophet of non-violence, and asked him his reaction to the riots/uprisings occurring across the country from 1965-1967 in Watts, Newark, Detroit, and Grand Rapids. Dr. King wrote a speech as a response. He gave a version of this speech in Grosse Pointe, Michigan in March of 1968.

“...There are literally two Americas. One America is beautiful...this America is overflowing with the milk of prosperity and the honey of opportunity...

But tragically and unfortunately, there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness...millions of people find themselves living in rat-infested, vermin-filled slums. In this America people are poor by the millions. They find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

The American Negro finds himself living in a triple ghetto. A ghetto of race, a ghetto of poverty, a ghetto of human misery. So what we are seeking to do in the Civil Rights Movement is to deal with this problem. To deal with this problem of the two Americas. We are seeking to make America one nation, Indivisible, with liberty and justice for all...

“It is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society...

...Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention...”

Section 2. The Map: What was life like in Grand Rapids between 1930 and 1967? Take a “tour” through locations on the Grand Rapids map of slide 19. Record what you find in at least 4 of the locations.

Location	Brief description of what you learned at this tour stop:

Reflection: After you you have viewed the photos and read the description of the events in Grand Rapids in July, 1967. Write down a few ideas before we discuss as a class.



Did events in July, 1967 have a purpose? What was it?

Who is most responsible for the destruction?

Evaluate the extent of the legitimacy of the authority that was being rebelled against.

Would you call these events a riot or an uprising?

Press Coverage from 1967

- Read the headlines and enlarged excerpts of the press coverage.
- Make a tally list of how many times you see the word riot or the word uprising.

Riot	Uprising

Final Discussion

Did the press consider this a riot or an uprising?

How did the press description of the events compare with our class discussion?

How did the press description compare with Dr. King's thoughts on the events?

What do you think accounts for the differences?