

# TAKING TO THE STREETS



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## WORDS TO KNOW

**demonstrations**

**disenfranchisement**

**ghetto**

**protest**

**lynching**

**Kerner Commission**

**resistance**

**civil rights**

**uprising**

## THINK BEFORE YOU READ

**What are the best ways to make change?**

**Are street protests effective?**

**Is breaking the law justified in fighting discrimination?**

Cover: In 1962, members of the Detroit, Michigan Branch of the NAACP Housing Committee make signs that can be used in protests. Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

## THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON

In 1963, on her 12th birthday, Edith Lee-Payne traveled with her mother and aunt to Washington, D.C. Her mother wanted her to participate in a historic event: the March for Jobs and Freedom organized by **civil rights** leader A. Phillip Randolph. Randolph had proposed marches against segregation before, first in 1941 but the idea was postponed many times, as some of the demands for equality were met, especially jobs in defense production. Yet, there was so much more to be done. Randolph and his team, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, Dorothy Height, and many others, were frustrated with the slow progress toward equality. This time, it happened. Buses brought protestors from cities around the country. More than a quarter million marchers attended, including 60,000 who were White. This march focused on not just one issue, but a broad civil rights agenda that included housing, jobs, school desegregation, adequate education, voting rights, and a minimum wage.



Edith Lee-Payne’s photo was taken at the march and printed in newspapers nationwide. Some called her the “poster girl” for civil rights. Looking back years later she said, “I was kind of glad to be standing with people that wanted to make things right.”

**Resistance** to racism and discrimination is a part of American history. Over and over, groups targeted by discrimination have united to oppose housing segregation as it spread throughout the nation. People made their opinions known in different ways. One method was taking to the streets in public **demonstrations** and **protests**.

Photograph of Ethel Lee Payne at the March on Washington in 1963. Courtesy of the National Archives

Roy Wilkins and A. Philip Randolph lead the Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C., 1963. Courtesy of the National Archives



## THE SILENT PARADE OF 1917

In July 1917, more than 8,000 Black men, women, and children walked for 30 blocks down New York City's Fifth Avenue, moving in total silence to a muffled drumbeat. The Silent Parade, organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was a response to recent **lynchings**, mob riots, and other acts of violence against Black Americans. Children led the parade, followed by women dressed in white, and finally men dressed in black. In the invitation to march, the NAACP said it was "thoroughly opposed to Jim Crow cars etc., segregation, discrimination, **disenfranchisement**, lynching, and all the evils that are thrust upon us."

Marchers carried signs with slogans such as "Make America safe for democracy," "Race prejudice is the offspring of ignorance and the mother of lynching," and "The world owes no man a living but every man an opportunity to earn a living."



NAACP silent protest parade in New York City against the East St. Louis massacre, 1917. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## UPRISINGS OF THE LATE 1960S

During the late 1960s, unrest broke out in Los Angeles, New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and dozens of other cities across the country. Many of these uprisings were sparked by incidents of employment discrimination or police brutality. People had become tired of poor housing conditions, lack of opportunity, and prejudice. Frustration exploded into street protests that often became violent.

Pamela D. Jones was ten years old when the disturbances erupted in Detroit. She remembers,

*Being the oldest of my three siblings I think I was more afraid of what could happen as I listened on while my parents would watch images of buildings burning, folks looting, and the National Guard patrolling the neighborhoods. My fear was of our house catching on fire. It seemed like people were burning down homes and businesses all around the city. As young as I was, I had enough sense to know if we had to get out of the house in a hurry, I was going to need some clothes. So I put a few items in a bag and hid the bag under my bed...just in case.*

In the end, Jones did not have to leave her home, but many people did. All together, uprisings in at least 109 cities across the nation during 1967 resulted in more than 150 deaths, more than 20,000 arrests, injured tens of thousands, and destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses.



## THE KERNER COMMISSION

Some White Americans expressed confusion and surprise at the widespread outrage. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson brought together a group named the **Kerner Commission** to analyze the causes of violent urban uprisings. In its report, the commission stated that the roots of the uprisings lay in racism, police brutality, lack of jobs, and lack of investment in cities: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the **ghetto**. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

The commission recommended immediate investment in poor and minority neighborhoods with the goal of true integration. The call was largely unheard. In polls, 58% of Black Americans agreed with the commission’s findings, but 53% of White respondents did not believe racism had caused the violence.



President Lyndon B. Johnson with members of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission) in the Cabinet Room of the White House, Washington, D.C., 1967. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Street protests have taken many forms. What makes a street protest effective? What makes it ineffective?
- Can protests alone create social change? Are other efforts also needed?
- Can you think of other times in history when people thought violence was justified to ensure change?