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Local

After 1968 riots, Baltimore 'not worth it' for some residents

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BALTIMORE -

As a 29-year-old pharmacy manager, Theodore Sophocleus ignored calls from his bosses to close the Read's drugstore at Light and Cross streets as riots raged across the city.

If he closed, his workers told him, looters would rob and destroy the store.

"They were concerned the devastation was working its way into South Baltimore," Sophocleus said, 40 years after Baltimore's race riots.

Rioters spared his store, and the next day it opened again.

But the rest of the city suffered an enormous toll: Six died, and 700 suffered injuries. Rioters looted and burned thousands of businesses, causing losses estimated at \$10 million. Some neighborhoods never recovered.

But while the riots accelerated the decline of huge sections of Baltimore, the downward spiral had begun years before, as whites fled to the suburbs in the 1960s to escape a city ravaged by poverty, violence and growing racial divides.

Many residents, including Sophocleus, now a state delegate representing Anne Arundel County, had already answered the call of the suburbs before the riots.

"The riots by themselves didn't do it," said Dunbar Brooks, state school board president and demographer for the Baltimore Metropolitan Council.

In Baltimore County, the white population swelled in the years before the riots, said Peter Levy, a history professor at York College of Pennsylvania. From 1950 to 1970, the county's population more than doubled to 621,000, U.S. Census data show, while the city lost nearly 50,000, bringing its population to 905,000.

"The riots remind us there were other issues, but we shouldn't see them as the single cause," Levy said.

Many family-owned shops were destroyed, and some residents feared returning to the city, Sophocleus said.

"People just said, 'It's not worth it,' and closed up shop," he said.

Federal housing policies created more opportunities for homeownership, said Matthew Durlington, a Towson University assistant professor. This, coupled with a growing highway system, allowed more people to move to the suburbs, he said.

In some ways, the suburbs seemed isolated from the riot-ravaged city.

"It was sort of a city issue and a city problem. There wasn't a whole lot we could do," said Ed Cochran, former Howard County executive, who was finishing a term on the county school board when the riots erupted.

The riots widened the divide between the city and the suburbs, said Pamela Ehrenberg, author of "Ethan, Suspended," a children's book with the '68 riots as the backdrop.

Ehrenberg remembered growing up in Parkville and rarely visiting the city to see her grandmother.

After the riots, she said, "it was almost like a permanent wall went up."

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